

Studying the Role and Symbolic Meanings of Cypress Tree (Sarv) in Miniatures of “Tahmasbi Shahnameh”

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Abstract

According to different beliefs and cultures, trees are considered as valuable and sacred beings, and Iranians also have much respect for the tree. Cypress tree is one of the trees with symbolic concepts and mythological power among the Iranians who has won the attention of the poets and authors in different periods, especially the 4th and 5th centuries AH Hakim AbulQasim Ferdowsi is one of the poets, who has used all types of plants, particularly cypress and its symbolic concepts and, considering its various types, has attributed many traits to it; thus, he could present many pleasant descriptions from the nature and human Tahmasbi Shahnameh, as a Persian miniature masterpiece, has depicted the same symbolic and mysterious concepts in the miniatures. There has been no independent research on the role of cypress tree in the miniatures of Tahmasbi Shahnameh. Detail analysis of the miniatures in this Tahmasbi Shahnameh required the symbolism of plants, particularly the cypress tree. The present article is a response to the questions such as “Is the cypress tree important in these miniatures?” and also “How much this element is associated with other elements?” The hypothesis indicates that the cypress plays an effective role in images, both visually and symbolically, and it is highly associated with heroes and prominent characters of the miniature. The research method is analytical and some of the most important miniatures of Tahmasbi Shahnameh are described based on symbolism literature and other references. The results show that Iranian miniaturist, considering the symbols of nature, has presented the symbolic meanings and concepts of cypress and its association with heroes and characters in the miniatures using other symbols such as water, mountain, stone, and other trees along with cypress. In these miniatures, the cypress tree is also the symbol of immortality, great men, eternity, grandeur, goodness, and freedom.

Keywords

Shahnameh, miniature, cypress tree, symbol.

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Introduction

A tree as one of the significant elements of the nature is always respected and considered sacred among different nations upon which many myths have been written and created. However, the cypress tree, regarding its natural features and properties, is considered sacred and valuable among various nations including Iranians. The cypress can grow in any climatic conditions due to being strong and resistant, and it is considered as the symbol of a great man. Thus, not only is the role of tree quite obvious in the ancient and literary texts but also in other types of art. From the bas-reliefs of Persepolis to the carpet motifs in different eras and miniature. Persian miniature, using the wide range of ideas and a close association with the literature, has unique creativity. The elements of nature in miniature works are the symbols of world of ideas, which are used by the miniaturist to create a flawless allegorical world; The world that is the eternal paradise in the mind of the miniaturist, from which he has fallen down and to which still hopes to return some day. This type of art has always been used in literature; hence, most of the miniature works have been the illustration of literary books, The Shahnameh of Ferdowsi, as the largest national epic, is there a reflection and representative of the ancient Iranian culture, has always been a pure resource for imagery of the miniatures. The wonderful awareness of Ferdowsi, in recognizing different roles of imagery in his poetry indicates his understanding of the harmony between the image and theme. The elements of simile and metaphor and other images are terrestrial and sensible, and this earthly viewpoint is one of the essential mysteries that made his epic expression tangible and emotional. This is the terrestrial aspect of his vision and images that made him use the abstract meanings and concepts in a material manner. All the elements of nature have a special place in his poetry; including the cypress trees which shows the symbolic meanings in his poetry.

Considering the important role of the cypress tree in the culture of Iranians and the point that it is

one of the main reliefs in Iranian miniature, in this manuscript, the role of this tree in several depictions from the Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasb Safavi is investigated and analyzed. This masterpiece contains 258 miniatures, which are not homogeneous in terms of quality, and the drawing skills are different. Many of them are mid-sized, but 10-12 miniatures are considered as masterpieces of the world (Graber, 2011: 103- 104). In this article, in regard to impossibility of examining all the miniatures, 8 miniatures that were drawn by the master miniatures of the time, in which cypress has an essential role, have been selected. The miniatures have been selected from two books of Masterpieces of Persian Miniature and DASBVCH DER KONIGE (Das Schanname des Schah Tahmasp).

Research Literature

Some mentions on the role of trees in miniature are provided in different works. The first one is an article entitled "Matching shape of trees in nature with Persian miniature works" by Somayeh Saleh Shoushtari and Aliasqar Shirazi, in which the tree species in nature are comparatively analyzed with similar examples in some miniature works. Further, in the article by Maryam Najafi and Morteza Afshari, entitled "Visual characteristics of trees in Persian miniature", the visual elements of trees are discussed, descriptively and analytically, and an overview of its most constant features is presented as the research achievements. However, there has been no independent study on the role of cypress in miniature, particularly in the depictions of the Shahnameh of Tahmasbi, thus far.

Plants and trees in Persian literature and art

According to the Iranian symbolism related to Genesis, the heaven is the first material creature, the earth and water are in the second and third rankings, and plants are in the fourth place. In the introduction of the Shahnameh, Ferdowsi has considered the levels of existence derived from the four elements and knows the creation of the heaven prior to the

earth, mountains, plants, and animals and humans (Ferdowsi, 1994, Vol. 1: 15,16). Ancient Iranians have great respect to the trees, and sometimes praise the trees to the point of worshipping. "Sanctity of some evergreen trees or old trees in Iran, due to the proximity to the shrines and sacred places, is also a sign of sanctity of plants in Persian beliefs" (Bahar, 1997: 261).

Language of symbols and mysteries as a universally understandable language to all the human beings has a tendency to develop unity and eliminate multiplicity. Poets always desire to the unconscious emotional involvement with natural phenomena; the "tendency to the old or ancient remnants of eternal patterns awakens the approach to the spirit of the nature and results in the creation of a kind of communal life between humans and natural elements." (Yung, 1978: 137 & 57). In the plant imagery of the poets, the use of plant elements has created the different level of perception in the speakers that shows the persistence of mysteries and symbols in ancient and modern Persian poetry. Tree has always been considered as a symbol of rebirth and return to single principle, a complete reflection of human and unique conception of man's ancestry (Zomorodi, 2008: 37). The periodic rebirth of plants in the light of their continuous growth is the reminiscent of the myth of the eternal return to a single principle (Satari, 1988: 21).

Humans always feel a father-child bond with trees, and in accordance to some tribes, the humans have several souls, of which one is dominated by the plants (Yung, 1978: 24). Hence, among the natural symbols, tree is regarded as genealogical idea and the key of growth in the human psychological development.

In Iran, the initial plant examples can be found on the tiles, seals, and stones. Elamite, or the Persian World, is full of plant images, as the source and origin of trees. Such as metal works of Lorestan, Marlik and Ziviyeh. At the time of Aryans in Iran, the age of Medes, the ages of Achaemenid and Parthian, the ceremonial image of tree can still be observed

(Javani, 2000: 32). In the third and fourth centuries after Islam, in Samani era, the images and symbols of tree can be seen in all the art works remained from this period. In Iran, most of the trees such as vine, sycamore, and pomegranate have been sacred; cypress was considered the tree of life in those days and its image has been always used symbolically in all the arts.

Cypress

The scientific name of cypress is adapted from the Greek name, and derived from two terms kuo means the production, and pariso means equal, on the occasion of the symmetry of tree branches and crowns (Sabeti, 2006: 296). In Iranian culture, the Sarv (cypress) is the name of a well-known tree that is divided into three types, including Sarve Azad, Sarve Sahi, and Sarve Naz. It is been told, that the cypress and olive trees, which are evergreen, has come from the heaven (Maseh, 1974: 243). Cypress has immortality and eternal mystery and called the tree of life among many tribes for its long life and the evergreen nature which has a strong mythological aspect. As the Greeks and Romans believe, the cypress is related to the Gods of Hell, hence, it is used to decorate the cemetery. Celtic people also consider this tree as the symbol of death, pace of life and sign for the moment of death. They believe the dead should be buried in tree, which is hollow, since the life of human is continued in the plants (Zomorodi, 2008: 162). At the Mediterranean coasts, cypress is the mourning tree, and undoubtedly, like the coniferous, it is defined as eternity because of its incorruptible gum and evergreen leaves. According to Chinese, the cypress is alive and its deepest roots are thousand years old as the origin of human lifespan. They also believe] that if the cypress gum has been put on the heel foot, the person would be able to walk on the water surface, meaning the cypress gum would lighten the body. (Shovalieh, 1999: 58, 59). In accordance with Old Testament, the house of God is built with wood of Sarve Azad (cypress) by David in God's command (Yahaghi, 2007: 248).

According to Torah, cypress is the symbol of stability and eternity at the place, where God wanted to be permanent, and also since sun is the great symbol of rebirth and immortality, the comparison of sun and cypress is one of the first mythological archetypes (Zomorodi, 2008: 163). The design on the cashmere scarves and etching in Isfahan is like a cypress, of which the tip is bent by the blowing wind, suggesting that since the ancient times, people have paid special attention to this tree. Just like myrtle, mirage and haoma, the tall cypress has been sacred and the special symbol of Iranians from the ancient times for the above mentioned-reasons. (Yahaghi, 2007: 460). The cypress also represents the positive and lively aspect of spirit and religious life, so the sacred places in Iran are surrounded by cypress trees. Cypress grows straight and it is called a free tree for its freedom from the evil, distraction and branches of other trees. As some said, attributing the freedom to cypress is reminiscent of its relationship with Nahid (Anahita), which is a symbol of freedom in the myths. It has also been said that trees with not fruits can be called free.

Cypress been told why don't you bring fruit
 Answered those who are free are empty-handed
 (Sadie, 1977: 493)

It has been said, every tree has a prime and a decline, as they are sometimes leafy and fresh, and sometimes faded and leafless, but cypress is evergreen, that's why it is called free. According to the beliefs of people about cypress, this tree has always been noticed by poets and authors and, using its attributed traits, poets have presented delicate descriptions on the nature and humans. In Persian literature and poetry, there are many traits used for the cypress such as genuine, tall, prideful, rebellious, fresh, young, glory, loyalty, adornment, empty-handed. In many cases, the cypress implies the height of the lover, which comes along with traits such as elegant, fluid, compassionate, green-dressed etc.

Tree in the miniature

The Persian miniature benefits from the rich

and spiritual vision, as well as the wide range of imagination and thought. In the miniatures of the books designed for the Persian kings, the gardens had a significant role. In these books, there are enormous scenes of hunting grounds and forests in a tapestry-like world of the beautiful gardens (Khansari, et al, 2004: 149). It was natural that the garden and its complex bonds should provide a world full of metaphors for the mystic poets. One of these poets was Ferdowsi, Ḥakīm of Toos. He used colors and designs in Shahnameh, and with proper use of visual simile and metaphor, he created an appropriate context for illustration of the miniatures. Shahnameh has always been as one of the inspiration resources for miniaturists in different periods, especially in the schools of Herat and Tabriz. Garden in Persian miniature is an emphasis on praising of the beautiful nature (Nasr, 2010: 126). However, the miniatures have special attention to the trees, such as other elements of nature including water, mountain and so on, which have been portrayed in most of the miniatures. In different periods, some miniaturists had drawn the trees similar to the nature, and sometimes, they were drawn quite abstract and subjective,

However, in any case, there has never been pure realism (Saleh Shoushtari, Shirazi, 2008: 6). With a glance at the depictions of different schools, it can be found that this special perspective is culminated among the miniaturists during the Safavid dynasty and it is quite particularly obvious in the masterpiece of this era, the Shahnameh of Tahmasbi. In the design of the trees in the initial periods of miniature, exaggeration can be seen rarely, and they are often designed in a simple manner. In the patriarch school, although the design of trees is still simple, but a little exaggeration can be found in curvature of trees. Along with the development process in the miniature, the drawing have also taken some steps towards perfection, and in the miniatures in the Timurid and Safavid era, the trees are drawn curved, and exaggeration can be found clearly in its twisting (Najafi & Afshari, 2011: 83). Tahmasbi Shahnameh

is a massive Shahnameh composed of 760 two-page sheets, and 258 miniatures, with only on completion date (907-906 AH), but certainly it takes tens of years to complete. In examining the cypress tree in most of the miniatures of Shahnameh, we found that the miniatures has achieved greater recognition on various types of cypress trees, and their attention to the surrounding nature is increased, so they have used different types of cypress, including, Sarve Azad, Sarve Naz, and Sarve Sahi, and Sarve Kuhi, in the illustrations considering the text of the poetry.

Analyzing cypress in some of the miniatures of Tahmasbi Shahnameh

Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 are related to one of the important and wonderful stories in Shahnameh, the story of Zakhak. Describing the dominance of darkness and oppression over the brightness and justice, which was lasted for thousands of years. Many of the events in the epic stories are represented in the dreams before they are really happened. The dreams in Shahnameh are symbolic, and the foretellers discover the secrets and mysteries in the dreams (Pourkhaleghi Chatrodi, 2002: 53). There are moments in Zakhak's dream, in which, from one perspective, correspond with the viewpoints of psychologists such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, IbnSirin, etc., and from another perspective, with the Persian symbolic and mythological world. Jung believes that dream is narrated in a visual language, about which we have a relative understating.. According to the story in Shahnameh, it seems that Zakhak has mysterious self-recognition of his fateful dream, and even was afraid of thinking about it. Tree in Shahnameh is the symbol of human, both man and woman. In dream interpretation of Ibn Sirin, tree is the symbol of human. "He considered the cypress as the symbol of clever man" (Teflisi, 2001: 229). In Zakhak's dream, Fereydoun is in the shape of a cypress tree and is revealed from the palace of kings with the glory of Jamshid. Then, he shines like the sun with the existential necessity for the world as that of the rain.

The blessed Fereydoun was born
Another one step into the world
So the tall cypress has been grown
And destroyed the royal magnitude
He owned the glory of Jamshid
And shining like the sun
The world requires the rain
As the mind needs the knowledge
(Ferdowsi, vol. 1: 57)

In the first three miniatures, Fereydoun is not present, but he is the theme. The cypress trees in these miniatures have been emerged from the Zakhak Palace, signifying the presence of Fereydoun. Since the miniaturist was not able to use the Fereydoun, he has shown his presence using the cypress trees (Fesharaki & Mahmoudi, 2011: 7 & 8). Cypress is an evergreen and alive tree. The poets called the cypress a free tree, since it is free of burden of fruits, or from the autumn, which is one of the reasons the poet resembled Fereydoun as the cypress. The cypress grows in any climate conditions, it is strong and stable, and the symbol of great men, and has always been significant in Iranian art. According to Persian tradition, Zarathustra brought the tree from the heaven, and planted it in the fireplace (Yahaghi, 2009: 46). Here, the bond between miniature and literature is quite obvious, the miniaturist and poet has the same thoughts, and the Iranian miniaturist, using the poem and his imagination, creates the elements and symbols. Here, the presence of Fereydoun is portrayed skillfully with cypress trees using the simile. Trees which are exalted from behind the palace of Zakhak and are the symbol of his overthrow. In Figure 4, the central character of the depiction is Fereydoun. Since in the fortune-telling book, famous trees are interpreted as men (Afshar, 2006: 24) and Bahram Beyzai has also considered the cypress tree as a symbol of Fereydoun in the book "Roots of the Old Tree", cypress is Fereydoun in this depiction. Cypress is the symbol of Ahura and goodness, since it is resistant against the evil.

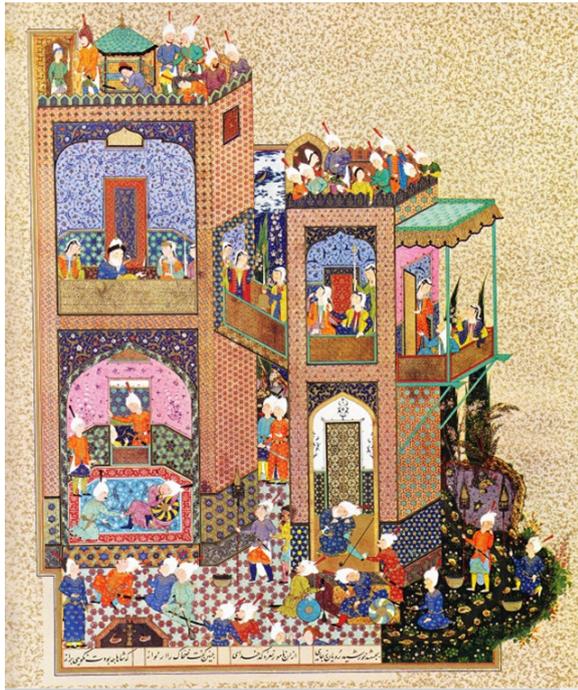


Fig. 1. Zahhak tells his dream to his wives. Tahmasbi Shahnameh, 16th/10th century. Source: Von stuart, 1976.

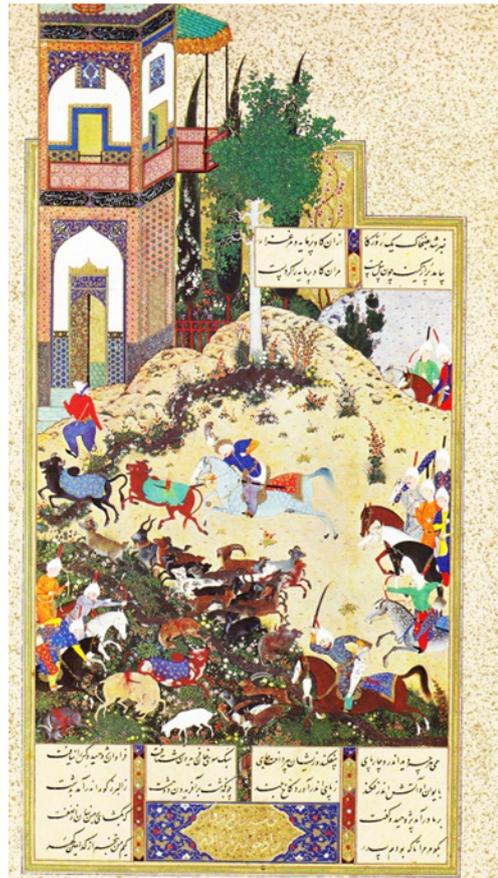


Fig. 3. Killing the bull by Zahhak. Source: Von stuart, 1976.

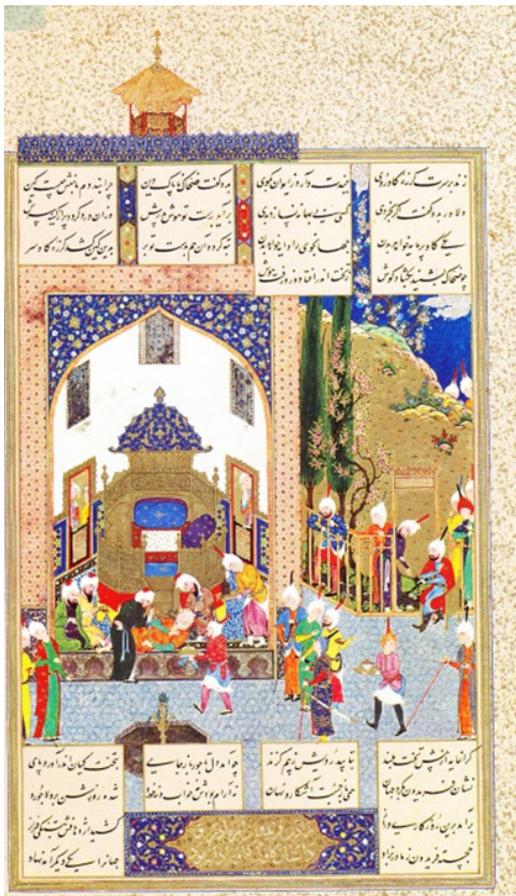


Fig. 2. Prediction of foretellers and the fall of Zahhak. Tahmasbi Shahnameh, 16th/10th century. Source: Von stuart, 1976.

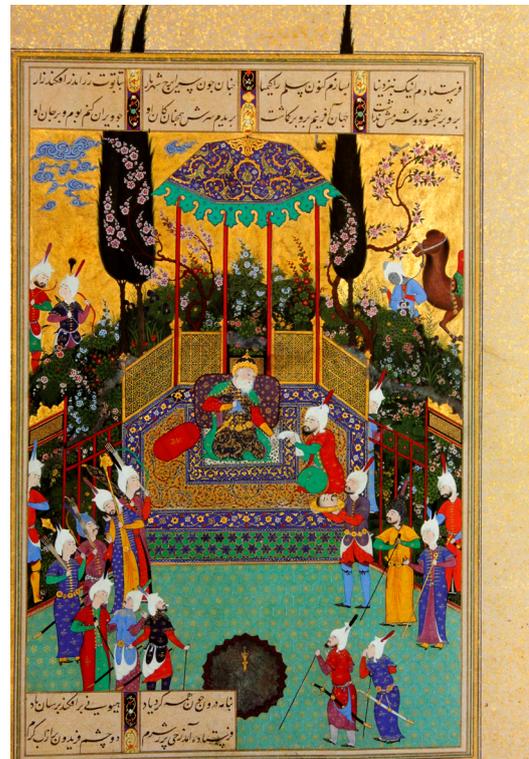


Fig. 4. Tahmasbi Shahnameh, Fereydoun receives Toor's head. 16th/10th century. Source: Von stuart, 1976.

Cypress is the symbol of freedom, these are the reasons why the poet resembled Fereydoun as cypress, and the miniaturist also used these similes to illustrate the miniature. Moreover, the stream of water has started from one side of miniature and passed through the beneath of cypress tree, and then appeared above the head of Fereydoun, and then again passed beneath the cypress trees on the other side and went outside of the image. Obviously, this can express the relationship of the tree with Nahid, which is known as freedom (Rangchi, 2000: 202-201); (Fig. 5 & 6).

Figures 5 and 6 are belonged to another story in Shahnameh, birth of Zal and his fate. In these two miniatures, two straight cypress can be seen, Sam:

I was given a son, whom I dropped
 Been ungrateful for the ignorance
 The precious Simurgh picked him up
 Ordered by the Almighty
 He was grown like a tall cypress

As I was disgraced and Simurgh was honored
 (Ferdowsi, 1994, 1: 152)

Sam likened his son to the cypress, so the cypress is the symbol of Zal in here. The cypress is also considered as the sign of mourning and endless grief and confusion in this adventurous sorrowful world (Vahed Doust, 2008: 348). According the story of the birth of Zal, whose hair was white since he was born, Sam, his father, could not stand having such a son and has ordered to take him to the Alborz-Kuh, place him at the peak of the mountain close to the house of Simurgh and return (Rastegar Fassaie, 2009: 485). Rejection of Zal by Sam, and his wandering could be the symbolic relationship of Zal with cypress tree, and the name of Zal, means “incapable of aging” (Kazazi, 2007: 393), and the term of “Pir” (old) is derived from “Perika” meaning the spirit of trees and springs (Bahar, 1997: 261), which could be another reason for relationship of Zal with tree (fig. 7 & 8). Figure 7 is related to Sindokht’s getting aware of her daughter, Roodabeh (Love story between Roodabeh and Zal).

In Shahnameh, woman is sometimes similar to the

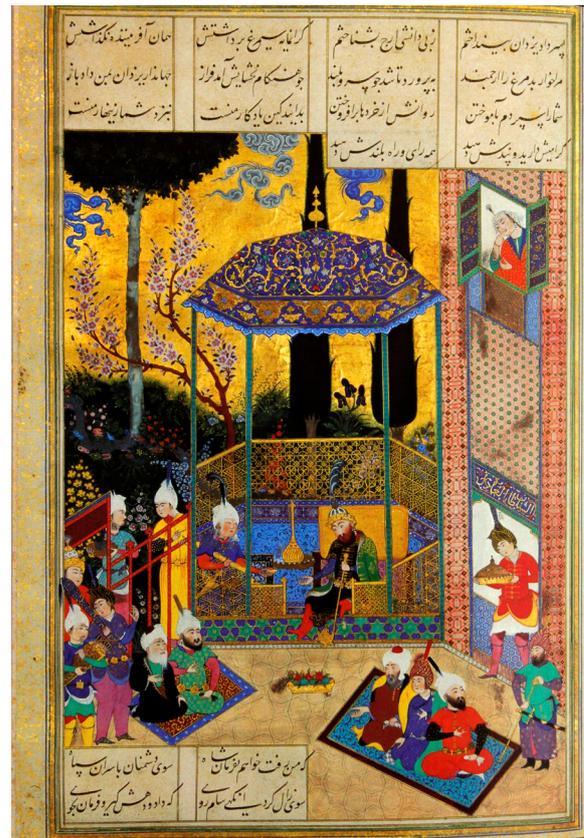


Fig. 5. Tahmasbi Shahnameh, birth of Zal, 16th/10th century. Source: Von stuart,1976.

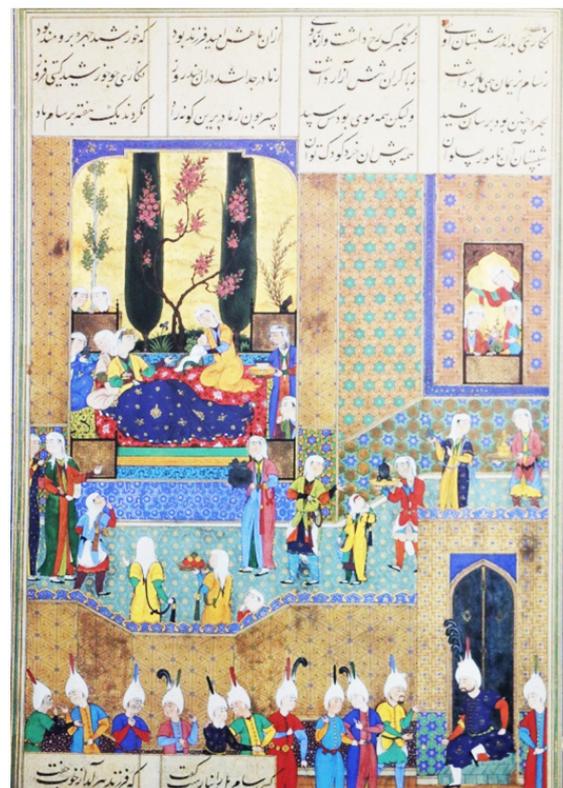


Fig. 6. Tahmasbi Shahnameh, Sam leaves Zal, 16th/10th century. Source: Von stuart,1976.



Fig. 7. Tahmasbi Shahnameh, awareness of Sindukht from her daughter Roodabeh, 16th/10th century. Source: Von Stuart, 1976.



Fig. 8. Tahmasbi Shahnameh, Rostam destroys the castle of oppression, 16th/10th century. Source: Von Stuart, 1976.

garden of flowers, spring, paradise, flower, flower of spring, rose, tall cypress, tulip-faced, cypress, cedar, beautiful cypress, silver and majestic cypress (Rastegar Fassaie, 1990: 344). Here, there is another cypress tree that might be the same silver cypress that “the trait of tall white-dressed person is now used for Roodabeh” (Ravaghi, 2011: 1546). Roodabeh is a traditional Persian name, and Some have interpreted it as the shining or growing child, but some have called it the shining face (Rastegar Fassaie, 1990: 460). The miniaturist has drawn a cypress with bowed branches that also could be Sarve Naz as an allusion for lover or beautiful beloved. In this miniature, the stream of water is flowing beneath the cypress. In the Persian mythology, the bond between Anahita, the goddess of rain and waters as the source of all the material developments and portrayed as a beautiful and powerful girl, and trees as well as plants is because she becomes the origin of rain and snow and, with the assistance of Tish trya star (rain), could defeat the demon of the land; thus, a torrential rain falls which grows plants in the soil (Mirfakhraie, 1987: 45,44).

In Figure 8, where Rostam destroys the castle of oppression, the hero of Shahnameh is portrayed with the bow and arrow in the hands. Rostam is the result of bond of Zal, lunar tree, Heroispe egg, Sarve Azad of Shahnameh, Roodabeh, Sarve Simin-e Barmahrooy, Shirzad adorned with Gohar Diba with curly hairs, and finally Aredvisur Anahita, pure river (Roodabeh), and Rostam (Pourkhaleghi Chatrodi, 2008: 87). This name is not mentioned in Avesta. The Pahlavi form of the word was “Rodestahm”, or “Rotestaham” or “Devistaham”. Thus, the name is made of two parts. The first part is Rot, Rod, or Roy, which has become “Ro” in the final Persian form, and the second part was “Setahm”, which has turned into “Setam. The first part means “High and Height” and “Shape and Body”, from which “Roy” is remained as face in Persian. Setak is the equivalent of “Reuzeh” in Sanskrit, meaning the height, and In India and Iran, “Reud” means growing form which “Rastan” and “Rooidan” is remained in Persian. The

second part comes from ancient Persia and Avesta, meaning “strong” and “tough”, the second part is the same name used in “Taham” meaning strong and powerful in Persian, which is the feature of great heroes. According to what has been said, “Rostam” means the person with huge and strong body.” (Kazzazi, 2007: 450). As mentioned earlier, the name of Rostam is corresponded with features of the cypress tree, and according to what has been mentioned above, the cypress is the symbol of great men as well as the symbol of Rostam. The talented Safavid miniaturist, with a deep understanding of poetry and a special look to the nature, has portrayed all the concepts and symbols in the poetry with unparalleled skills. In this image where a little part of story outside of palace is drawn, the junipers have been illustrated elegantly by the miniaturist, which are not existed in other stories and scenes illustrated inside palace. Iranian miniaturist has paid attention to all the aspects, and portrayed the decorative cypresses in most of the miniatures inside the palace where the Persian gardens have been shown, and illustrated the junipers in the battlefields and hunting grounds on the cliffs and rocks, and showed these cypresses on the mountains and rocks, which, representing these trees are junipers, and also implies the relationship between mountains and trees”. Mountains and stones are the most ancient parts in the sacred scenes. The mythical narratives and also the Iranian myths showing that the bond of sacred tree, tree of life, and cosmic tree with holy mountain is a well-known archetype among different nations. The most ancient sacred place is the part of microcosm, and macrocosm, meaning a perspective of stone, water, tree, which are three components of the sacred landscape” (Abeddoust, et al, 2011: 22).

Concusion

The trees, particularly the cypress trees are the symbolic elements in the beliefs of ancient people and Persian culture which are obviously reflected in the literature and art. Ferdowsi is one of the poets who has used all the elements of nature such as trees, especially the cypress tree, for imagery of his poetry, and his precious work,

Actually, the Iranian miniaturist was aware of all these concepts and symbols, and has shown their relationship properly with each other and with the characters in the story. It is worth mentioning that the cypress is shown with plantain in most of the miniatures, that without considering the symbolic meanings of plantain, it can also show the ancient traditions of Persian gardens, where cypress and plantain trees were often planted along with each other to make the look of garden beautiful all over the year (Maleki, 2006: 63). The plantain tree is also illustrated in the miniatures of this period in a more realistic manner compared to the earlier periods. With a general look at the miniatures examined in this paper, and also other miniatures in Shahnameh, it can be found that when the miniaturists have portrayed a cypress tree, a blossom tree is also illustrated in front or besides the trees. The beautiful impact of visualization of the flowers against the pure blue sky, in contrast to deep green of bending and magical cypresses is not achieved in other types of art (Upham Pope, 1999: 174). As we know, the blossom trees are the symbol of instability and short life, in contrast to the evergreen cypress trees. according to the aesthetic aspect of illustrating the trees, the artist might also show that the cypresses as the symbol of great men and heroes representing the persistent name and memory of these heroes, but they are also doomed to fall, and the transience of their life is the same blossom tree, which is portrayed in front of cypress trees delicately and symbolically. The human beings are the unstable emergence of shape and aspect of plants that returned to the trees as seeds or spirits after death, and once again came back to the womb of the world, then born again, and death is the reconnection with origin of life in the universe (Eliade, 1988: 89,88).

Shahnameh; a masterpiece that always attracted the attention of miniaturists. The miniaturists in the Safavid era with conscious perception of this symbol, has adopted its appearance with present samples in nature, and also considering the symbolic meanings and essence of this tree in most of his works, has given an imaginal aspect, and even beyond that, using the symbols such as water, mountains, stone and other trees along with cypress, has portrayed its symbolic concepts, and shows their relationship with heroes and characters in the miniature in a more beautiful manner. In the analyzed miniatures, the cypress is the symbol of immortality, great men, eternity, grandeur, goodness, and freedom, and also the symbol of many characters in Shahnameh, with a sort of hidden association. In these miniatures, the miniaturist, using his skills and talent, has illustrated all the symbolic meanings in words of Ferdowsi, observing all the aesthetic rules in the image.

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