

## Synthesis of Eastern and Western Culture in Contemporary Approach: An analysis of Raza Bukhari's conceptual paintings

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### Abstract

*Painting serves as a medium to satisfy artist's sense of perception and provides space to portray his own imagination. The researcher here reveals an attempt by Raza Bukhari to capture the fusion of two culture's, western cartoon character fitting in the eastern Persian miniature, or somewhere western subject adorned with Persian motif, creating contemporary approach in the traditional manner of miniature painting, which helps him to produce the visual copy of his expression and display his inner most thoughts. Observing two different tastes on one canvas brings the observer to discover the hidden messages of the visual, to effectuate the need this paper is going to focus the imagery and symbolism used by Raza Bukhari to express the human psychology of adopting foreign culture, and fitting themselves in that. His masterly skills of using opaque colour for creating a painting and the use of cat hair brush, accompanied with other techniques further modifies and helps in delivering the essence of painting.*

**Keywords:** Persian, miniature, motifs, carpet design, cartoon.

### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to compare and contrast the imagery used in the paintings of Raza Bukhari. The paintings selected for the research paper clearly demonstrates opposing elements of two cultures which further helps in distinguishing between the symbolic meanings of the painting. This research is carried out with the help of interviews from the artist and supports quantitative methodology including objective, subjective information with the analyses of the researcher.

A small scale single image painted on ivory in the form of necklace or medal was generally called miniature by the Europeans which later were also called for the pictures of manuscript. Art produced in the Middle East, Iran from 13th-16th century is known as Persian miniature painting, in the form of separate work of art or a book illustration or wall paintings, leaving influence on Islamic miniature traditions, the Mughal miniature in Indian subcontinent, and the ottoman miniature in Turkey. For a Persian artist location and space are the elements which are visible and accessible from all sides. If a Persian painting is observed it is symbolic and is also represented as the super natural because of the heaven like atmosphere it creates in its composition and presents a supernatural world.

Miniatures style developed three dimensionality in the miniature done in the Mughal time period. Images of animals and hunting scenes have been discovered in the caves of Lorestan province which confirms that the history of the art of painting in Iran dates back to the cave age.<sup>2</sup> The most prominent thing which make this art stand out from all other forms of art is the size and the detail. As compared to art produced in the West the perspective in the miniature paintings appears intriguing to the viewer. Persian miniature is much inspired by Chinese art which is clearly seen in the early examples of Persian miniature and later also absorbed influences from West.

It is known for its emphasis on the technique of layering perspective, for creating sense of space and use of natural and realistic motifs, subtle vivid colour palette and pure geometry covering subject matters of Persian mythology and poetry. In the early phase the Persian artists adopted influences of Chinese art and the colouring techniques as well but developed affiliation with the book art after the advent of Islam. Baghdad school known as the earliest school after Islam and focused on larger painted images and out of proportions with few colours lacking character of figure. These books are enriched with illustrations from fables and stories.

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1 Firouzeh Mirrazavi, "Persian Miniature," August 18, 2009,  
[http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Persian\\_Miniature.htm](http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Persian_Miniature.htm)

A new school emerged in Iran, after the invasion of Moguls, and appreciated the themes and techniques of Persian miniature. They came up with the masterpieces such as The *Shāhnāmā* of Firdowsi. The art of Persian miniature painting reached its climax in Teimur's era, and bring further the most refined artists like Kamaledin Behzad, during late Timurid and early Safavid time he remained the head of royal ateliers in Tabriz and Herat. The art of miniature painting continued to get more refine with minor or major differences in every era.

Later in the 20th century Master Mahmoud Farschian brought noticeable difference in displaying traditional miniatures in contemporary style and broadened the scope of Iranian painting. To enjoy the independent form of miniature painting free from the symbiotic relationship it preserves with poetry and literature was the new approach created by Mahmoud Farshchian. To bring Iranian art to international art scene his efforts stood exemplary.

Moving to a brief explanation of what we call a cartoon it is a form of art which includes satirical humorous drawings, illustration or animated films used as a source of expression or communication is known as cartoon. The word cartoon is derived from the Italian *cartone* which means big paper; it refers to an illustration which was made on a large scale for study of art work.<sup>3</sup>

### Artist's Biography

Graduating in Fine arts from National college of arts in 2014 and holding Masters degree in illustration from Tehran university, Iran in 2016, With over four successful exhibitions and seven group exhibition, Raza Bukhari took start with portraying his innermost thoughts enrooted from childhood which involves inspiration from his surroundings. Born in Iran to a Persian mother and Pakistani father, Raza absorbed two different cultures and identity, fascinated with the environment which provides him a Persian setup involving the most frequently used Persian carpets in every home, and the motifs in it was the first step of inspiration to indulge him in its glory. Secondly he caught up in the paintings of Mahmoud Farshchia, which according to the artist, is commonly seen feature in every Persian home. An 87 year old Persian master Mahmoud Farshchian who combined the classical canons of his national school, based on Persian poetry with the traits of western schools of painting.<sup>4</sup> He further explained his work as a medium to represent his perception of viewing the world from two different perspectives. Depiction of social issues and paintings on war scenes can also be seen in the early phase of his painting which later took shape of portraying complex religious, political issues and the nature of the culture in 21st century.

<sup>3</sup> "Cartoon." New World Encyclopedia. Accessed October 16, 2018. <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cartoon,1>.

<sup>4</sup> "The Man Who Broke the Ice between US and Iran during Nuclear Talks." November 04, 2017. Accessed October 05, 2018. <https://sptnkne.ws/fRXP,1>.

The artist continued painting with a little change in different phases of his career. Here I am conveying an idea of how he used the western imagery in depicting all the phases of his paintings. In the first painted series he showed the cultural bombardment represented by an old Simpson cartoon character in which the Simpson holding a machine gun with speedy fire of motifs. Motifs are conveying an impression of a particular culture with an uncomfortable environment of a war scene which portrays the elements of fear and pain all around. The depiction of unfinished motifs which are fired from that machine gun are the misconceptions created by the society about particular issue which remained as it is when passed to generations thus creating and presenting dual concepts.<sup>5</sup> Every cartoon character seen in the cartoon show delivers their own specific character; the artist used that character to deliver his thoughts in his painting. This approach shows another concern of the artist not only to bring further the cultural issue but also a phenomenon through which a person observes their surrounding through their experiences and conditioning. The second phase of his painting focuses on complex mindset in different age of a person. His series *Dhkr-i-yār* he explain the condition of a mind at which the centre of attention remains within ourselves, and this condition can be best described by the artist by using the character of Johnny Bravo in his series, a character which is all the time indulged in impressing the world around him. In this series there are paintings which focus on the other complex social issues in the surrounding which involve the position of women in different stages of her life, the condition in which she surrender herself for the ease of the people around her. He also experimented with other subjects, but the essence of his work revolves around the concept of examining the world from his own conditioning and portraying the basic concept which he absorbs, the opposite cultural differences, in his paintings. Later series bring forth the ideas of human psychology concerning different situations and the reaction it creates in the society is also captured. "Raza has experimented and explored different mediums like photo transfer, gouache on wasli, digital and archival prints, carpets, metal and each one speak its own language"<sup>6</sup>

He explained that technique and medium are the tool to display his expression and is never bound to use any single medium though his earlier works exhibits implementation of pure Persian techniques which involves the use of poster colour as a painting medium and *Qalam* term used for the miniature brush which means pen, made from the hair of Persian cat.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Hassan Naqvi, "Art Show Featuring Sculptures, Miniatures Starts," September 17, 2014, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/763305/group-exhibition-art-show-featuring-sculptures-miniatures-starts/>.

<sup>6</sup> Mariam Shafqat, "Work of Art: 'What's the Time in Your World?'" October 7, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1194827/work-art-whats-time-world/>

<sup>7</sup> Fatima Zahra Hassan, "Arts and Crafts Brush and Wasli Paper," November

The process in which hair of a Persian cat is embedded in the feather bone of a birds wing and tied with a piece of string, to make it easy to hold that brush suitable sticks of different length can be added at its back for supporting firm hold on brush.. In Persian miniature cat hair brush is preferred but in Mughal miniature brush made with the hair of squirrel tail is used most frequently. The artist used watercolour as well as poster colour and gouache on wasli.

Gouache is a white pigment mixed with Arabian glue and paint, it is added to the color to increase or decrease its intensity the speciality of gouache used in pigment is that after application the darker tone applied gets lighter when dried and the lighter tone applied gets darker after it is dried. For burnishing a stone is used which is rubbed on the painting before painting to make the surface smooth for painting and after finishing painting to achieve a shine on it. The process include image transfer on wasli next step include burnishing the surface which helps to smooth the paper and allows the brush to glide smoothly on it and later it is followed by careful rendering which include stroke free application. Miniature painting is also known for its rendering technique which is unique in its own way and involves patience and firm hold of the artist in order to achieve desired results. The artist also made use of gold leaf in his paintings but he used it in an imperfect way, discussed further in the paper.

### Perception of the artist behind his paintings

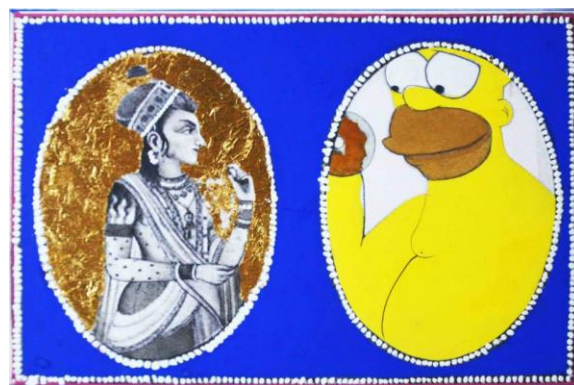
"If you keep on thinking about your work in terms of how wrong or right it is or if it has flaws, you are going the wrong way". Raza Bukhari<sup>8</sup> For him art is the expression of our own perception, and to paint his inner most thoughts he is free to express it in any medium, exploring new techniques to create the best possible visual in order to convey the meaning. In almost all the paintings of Raza Bukhari one can clearly observe the repetition of Islamic motifs. The concept of Persian carpet in the Persia is that it is a symbolic representation of heaven, the motifs in the carpets does not give any identified form of an object but are actually only the formation of geometric shape giving unending and beautiful assemblage to the eye of the viewer. The pattern of the carpets is not only seen on the carpet but can also be observed in book illustration. "The variations in the art of carpet making came with time and in the late 15th century Timmuriids transformed the art of carpet weaving from tribal art into a high art and executed cartoons which were supplied by court artists in urban workshops under the supervision of master weavers."<sup>9</sup> One of the most frequently used motif

in the Persian carpets at the centre in circular form commonly known as *Rosette* or *Shamsā*, delivers a major message of "oneness of God" "Radiating out from the centre medallion suggesting the petals of a rose and can be in geometric or naturalistic form."<sup>10</sup>

Art has been used for educating people and to present the religious messages to the ordinary illiterate ones for centuries even the early western artist used it in this way same as this the early Islamic art was also used for teaching and delivering religious concepts to the people and to those who are illiterate, for this reason all the elements in their painting hold a significance same as the motifs have.

There is a great importance of a circle in Persian miniature, the initiators of the art used it for didactic purpose and for documenting historical events for the reason they adopted every element which bears a concept for drawing circle they believe that in making a circle one has to start from one point and ends at the same point which represents that everything in the universe has to return to his creator from where it came. The most dominating in the Islamic history is the Islamic art in many Islamic territories and was raised from the traditions and lifestyles of the believers which show's philosophical truths governed by them. The rosette motif also explains that the petals around the circle is delivering another concept which is that everything is revolving around the circle and is present because of the presence of a circle. Circle is defined as the core ingredient of everything. From this explanation the artist wants to bring forth the Islamic ideas.

The unfinished motifs in his paintings represent lack of clarity of these concepts among people, and leading change in traditions from these distorted concepts. He further explains the carefree and rough application of gold leaf in his paintings which delineate a concept of adjusting delicate matters in a non suitable manner, where as application of gold leaf in Persian miniature is the most careful application and exhibits a viewer a sense of delicacy and grace.



**Plate.1** Simpson series

2013, file:///E:/DOWNLOADS/02ArtsandCraftsbrushandwaslipaper.pdf, 186.

<sup>8</sup> Mariam Shafqat, "Work of Art: 'What's the Time in Your World?'" October 7, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1194827/work-art-whats-time-world/>

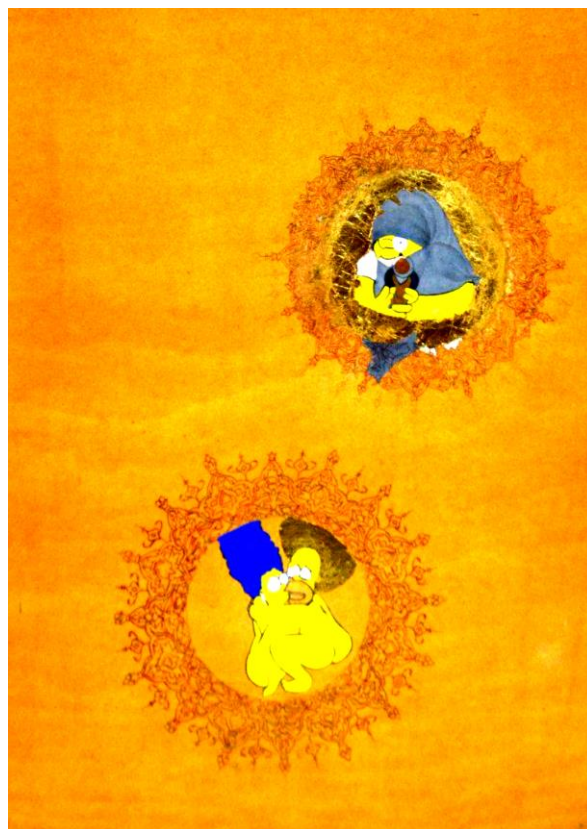
<sup>9</sup> Daniel Alcouffe, *Great Carpets of the World* (London, Great Britain: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 160.

<sup>10</sup> "Rug Layouts and Designs," *Handmade Persia and Oriental Rug Specialist LITTLE-PERSIA*, accessed October 5, 2018, <https://www.little-persia.com/rug-guides/rug-design/>.

The painting in plate.1 is taken from the early series of Raza Bukhari in which an old cartoon series *The Simpsons* is used as the conveying element to the observer. Simpsons cartoon series is the representation of the typical western life style. The yellow colour of the character was assigned to instantly click the observer while flipping the television channels as stated by the creator of the Simpsons cartoon series, Matt Groening. The painting reminds us of the portrait of the Mughal emperor Jahangir with his wife Nurjahan who was a brilliant women and left many contributions in the Mughal time period.<sup>11</sup> In this painting the same profile portrait of Nurjahan is shown on the left in black and white which is emitting elements of delicacy sophistication beauty but not freshness, the artist also applied gold leaf in the background which is most frequently used in Persian miniature to decorate surface and even around the head of religious figures as halo. This shows the artist's concern of intentionally making it beautiful, whereas on the opposite the Simpson cartoon character is shown facing the portrait of Nurjahan and conveying lazy, ugly and mocking feeling to the viewer but still painted colored as compared to the opposite portrait, Both the character belongs to an old time period where the Simpsons is the oldest cartoon character and is not shown nowadays and the Mughal miniature portrait of Nurjahan is also an old subject, but the difference appears in the treatment of both of these portraits, Here i am receiving a concept that the artist is presenting a thought of the modern era based on the concept of accepting foreign elements and traditions even if the condition applies that they are not worth it, and disowning our own culture despite of knowing the fact that it is worth appreciating. The blue colour used in the background is symbolizing deeply felt emotions and strong affiliation which explains that the artist is concerned about this issue.

The painting in plate.2 is also taken from *The Simpsons* series in which the artist has shown cartoon characters inside the two Shamsā motif which is showing some religious importance. Shamsā "A term derived from Shammas or sun used in text that are round in shape or rounded windows. It might have been used for windows because they admit sunlight and are thus Shamsā".<sup>12</sup> The motif was also used in persian carpets in the center. Persian carpets in Persian art represent Heaven and the motif in the centre symbolizes oneness of God. In the painting the Simpson character is shown in those motifs but in different getup. In the above motif Simpson is shown covered in black veil which is clearly the depiction of Muslim community because only in Muslim religion there is emphasis to cover the body, but the character in

that veil is opposite to the costume it is wearing which is pointing to a western character, at the same time with all that scenario it is also holding a machine gun which symbolizes distruction.



**Plate.2** Simpsons series

The artist also used gold leaf at the background, application of gold leaf at the background and the use of veil as the costume of the Simpson depict some symbolic representation of piousness as the gold leaf in the Persian tradition was only used for showing importance to some event or object. Whereas the other circle shows two nude figures in fear as it has been threatened. Here I am relating that the artist painted the situation how Muslims are being portrayed in the world. A clear indication of the cultural conflicts and presenting two opposite traditions in the second circle they have been shown nude which can be an indication of the community without set believes. The background is kept plain and the artist is making an effort to get all the attention on the motifs in which he spilt his centre of interest but the background is painted with a color yellow mixed with a little crimson to give it an ochre shade.

Color itself plays an important role in delivering the message of the artist. "Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammer, and the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul". Wassily Kandinsky<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Mvslim., "Power and Love: The Story of a Great Woman Who Ruled the Mughal Empire," , accessed October 11, 2018, <http://mvslim.com/power-and-love-the-story-of-a-great-woman-who-ruled-the-mughal-empire/>.

<sup>12</sup> Technical Glossary, "Islamic Art Network, , accessed October 13, 2018, <http://www.islamic-art.org/ArticlesOnline/IslamicArtArticles.asp>

<sup>13</sup> Kindinsky Wassily, "Concerning the Spiritual in Art," August 13, 2005,



## Conclusion

The paper has provided an overview of the information regarding the imagery used in the paintings of Raza Bukhari, with the perception of the researcher which explores the rendering of two opposing elements of different culture expressed with the help of individual characters communicating in their own language. The research further supports more investigation to be done for further finding as the results vary with variation of the minds involved.

In this painting the artist has painted the background in solid yellow color which symbolizes supremacy, light, peaceful feelings and warming effect on the soul. He is making the subject more prominent by keeping the background plain so that the viewer's eye stick to the subject painted on it. Yellow color was also used by Van Gogh in his painting. Here the artist used yellow with the complimentary color blue in plate 1 as the background and in the hair of Simpson in plate 2. Van Gogh also used blue color with its complementary yellow in his paintings which according to him was his quest for lighthearted and cheerful life which was never fulfilled.



**Plate.3** Dhkr-i-yār series

The painting in Plate 3 is taken from the series *Dhkr-i-yār* by Raza Bukhari, which mean "in remembrance of

beloved" in the series he mentioned the condition of the women in this society. The stages and sacrifices she went through in order to raise a generation. The artist used different textures to create the situation of chaos and disturbance. Overlapping of things is used in abundance to show overburdened situation. We can see three figures which are prominent two female figures and one is the male figure on left from side pose. The female portrait is shown resting on the head of another female figure probably of a child in closed eyes and calm state of mind as if the mother is satisfied and is in peaceful state of mind with her child, all around them is a complex situation which include the indication of broken wings on the top right corner which is pointing towards the condition in which a female after getting herself into motherhood camouflages her desires behind the happiness of her child. At the top of the head of female figures couple of donuts are also shown which is a symbol of fertility is because if we observe the shape of donut reminds us of the yoni (yoni and lingam) worshipped in Hinduism for fertility reason at the temple of shiva. In Persian miniature human being is a symbol of divine soul of the heavenly world and the hand represent power.<sup>14</sup>

There is a visible hand which is affectionately reaching the child's face. Here the symbolic meaning of the hand is power but the researcher perceives it as an unethical approach because the character of the figure is not visible and is made from side pose as hidden and the whole scene of the painting is conveying chaos and disturbance. The wings are made all around but broken. If we deeply observe the painting the artist has used the motif at the background which is clearly visible at the bottom of the painting. All the figures and other things are made on it but the two figures are made in the centre of the motif from where the motif begins to expand. The concept conceived from this painting is that the use of Islamic motif represents the Muslim community and the unfinished motifs depict misconceptions among those communities concerning several issues regarding a woman. The figure of the women and the child is shown in the centre to mark the importance on this matter which is for him the basic problem of all other problems generating from it. Distorted concepts are passed on to generations from the very beginning which promotes this practice thus preparing generations after generations with misconceptions leading to turbulent society.

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<sup>14</sup> Instructing Portraiture, 1st ed. (Tehran, Iran: Yassavoli, 2010),23.

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