

THE IMAGES OF ANGELS IN IRANIAN ART

A Civilization Interaction in a Comparative Study

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Abstract

This essay surveys the images of angels in the Iranian paintings particularly in 18th (under Safavid dynasty) and 19th (under Qajar dynasty) centuries in Iran. As a background, the concept of *Angel* has been briefly studied in four categories of Persian mythology, Iranian epic, Islamic culture and folk stories. The images of angels altered in different periods which were directly related to cultural interaction between "East" and "West". The angels in Safavid period were ideal images in a utopian atmosphere and their pictorial appearances were representations of philosophical and metaphorical concepts. Illustrating the angels for the Safavid artists was actually a way to penetrate into the concepts world. It is essential to mention that the challenge of "East" and "West" which had begun in Safavid period, reached to its critical summit in Qajar era. It was due to various reasons; Travelling abroad, getting acquaintance with modern ideas, constitutionalism movement, entering new technology such as photography and printing industry were some of the most influential causes which affected all aspects of Qajar society. Idealistic vision of Safavid painters changed into naturalistic one and the imaginary illustrations of angels altered to more realistic images. Many progressive newspapers began to be published in which the angels were represented as the symbols of freedom, homeland and constitutionalism. By studying about 50 dominant illustrations, this paper seeks to examine the conjunction between the images of angels and the most important civilization interaction in Qajar period in Iran.

Key words: *Iranian art, Islamic culture, angels images, civilization interaction.*

JEL Classification: Z

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Angles in Iranian Myths

In Avesta (the holy book of Zoroastrians) the angels are called *amesa-sepanda* while in Pahlavi (Iranian language used from 3rd to 10th centuries), they are named *amsaspand*. This word is a combination of three parts which are, A (negative prefix), *mesa* which means death and *sepanda* that is a definition for sacred and healing, so *amsaspand* means *sacred immortal*. (Gaviry, 1994: 122) In Iranian myths, it is narrated that after creation six skies and all creatures by Hormozd, he left them to his six *amsaspands* (angels): Bahman was to guard the animals. Ordibehesht had to watch over the fire. Shahrivar, the third angel, had the duty of preserving metals, Esfandarmaz had the responsibility of protecting the world and, Mordad, the sixth angel, was to watch over the plants (Yahaghi, 1997: 105). In Iranian mythology there are other angels whose ranks are not as superior as *Amsaspands*. They are called *Izad* (Yazata in Avesta) which means worship. In the sixth *yasht*, it is mentioned that there are thousands of Izads who are divided into two main groups: worldly and spiritual angels. Ahra-mazda is the superior angel of the spiritual world and Zoroastre is the head of the worldly angels. Izads are numerous including very famous ones such as Soroush, Bahram and Aban. Mehrdad Bahar, one of the most celebrated Iranian mythologists, believes that these angels were originally worshiped as gods before appearance of Zoroastrian religion (Bahar, 1998: 21). Mehr or Mitra is the angel of sun, kindness and promise. Ater (Azar) is a symbol for fire; Soroush is the symbol for obeying God; Bahram is the angel of victory and Aban is the angel of water. In Iranian mythology there is another rank of angels called Farvashi which were originally the spirits of Arian ancestors who were dedicated by God to guard all creatures in worldly and spiritual worlds (Amouzgar, 1994: 32).

1.2. Angeles in Shah-Nameh

Ferdowsi basically influenced by old stories, adopted many characters from old Persian tales; so the angels, particularly Soroush, play a very important role in Shah-nameh, the most renowned Iranian epic book. For instance when Fereydoun revolted against Zahak, Soroush equipped with heavenly power played a critical role in defeating him. On the other hand, Soroush helped two other main heroes in Shah-nameh; He was the assistant of Key-Khosrow in conquering Bahman castle and he supported Khosrow-parviz to free the country from Bahman-Choubin's sovereignty (Gharaci, 1995: 50).

1.3. Angeles in Islamic Culture

Angel (in Arabic language called Malak or Hatef) is a definition for a soft, heavenly and invisible creature that is responsible for doing some particular jobs. In Islamic culture the angels are numerous. The most intimate ones to God are Jebril, Israfil, Michael and Azrael. Jebril, originally a Hebrew word, means godly man and God's power. This angel was called by different names such as "Ultimate wisdom". It is mentioned in religious narratives that Jebril possess six wings which each of them leads to one hundred ones (Yahaghi, 1997: 88). Jebril has been sometimes imagined with a brownish and pale face wearing a white turban on his head (Ghazvini, 1990: 281). Jebril was present when God created Adam and after Adam's banishment from heaven, Jebril taught him writing, weaving, building houses and growing crop (Khazayeli, 1963: 22). Mohammad (570-632 CE), divine prophet of Islam, was in close relationship with Jebril. It has been mentioned in one of the Islamic Hadis that the prophet Mohammed at the age of two met Jebril (Sour - Abadi, 1965: 228). It is also mentioned that Jebril was present when Ali asked for Fatemeh's hand. Other prophets were also in connection with Jebril even though they were unable to observe him; some of them like Soleyman and Davoud possessed the ability of hearing God's inspiration. Another famous story is about the birth of the Jesus Christ who came to existence by the order of God. It has been mentioned that God ordered Jebril to put Jesus in Maryam's womb; (Atigh Neyshabouri, 1996: 281). It was also Jebril who transferred God's message to Moses when he was trying to pass his army through the sea. Jebril was also present when Ibrahim was thrown into fire (Sour - Abadi, 1965: 11). After restoration of Kaaba by Ibrahim with the help of Ismael, Jebril taught him all the ceremonies of Haj (pilgrimage to Mecca) (Yahaghi, 1997: 60) and when Ibrahim decided to sacrifice Ismael for obeying God's order, Jebril presented him a sheep to be sacrificed instead of Ismael. Another significant angel is Israfil who blows the trumpet on the resurrection day (fig1). The most important duty of this angel is to guide people to death and rebirth in the great resurrection day. Israfil was also appeared to Iskandar in his endless journeys and gave him some pieces of advice (Yahaghi, 1997: 60), Mikael is the angel who is responsible for people's nourishment. On the other hand he surveys the knowledge and wisdom of human being. In many cultures Tashtar (rain angel in Iranian narratives) is similar to Mikael (Yahaghi, 1997: 413). Mikael also appears in some religious stories; for instance he helped Ali to provide food for his family (Sour - Abadi, 1965: 342). Azrael is one of the four nearest angels to God who is titled Malak-ol-Mot (death angel) in the Koran. He is imagined with seven thousand wings while his body is covered with many eyes. When the prophet Mohammed

descended to the skies and arrived to the fourth sky, he met Azrael who was similar to a mirror and all the world was in front at him (Yahaghi, 1997: 306). In almost the same story the prophet Edris visited Azrael in the fourth sky. Apart from four nearest angels to God, Jebril (inspiration angel), Esrafil (resurrection angel), Mikael (cloud angel) and Izrael (death angel), many other angels have been mentioned in Islamic culture. Angels of seven skies as well as guard angels played different roles in religious stories. The stories about Rezvan, the angle of Heaven, are repeatedly narrated in Islamic tales. On the other hand, the angle of the Hell and two other angels appearing after the death of people (Nakir and Monkar) were imagined in religious stories as well as Iranian folk tales. There is a group of angels who refused to perform the God's orders. They were punished for this unforgivable sin and consequently were driven away from God's vicinity. Among them Satan is the most renowned one who was called Azazil (God's darling) before being outcast. Two other famous angels banished for their great sins were Harroot and Maroot. It is narrated in Al-Rahman Sura (part of Koran) that there is a group of angels who are called Gen. God made them from fire and because of their fire-like existence, they are invisible. Some believe that the Gens are able to appear in any shapes. It is written in Islamic narratives that the prophet Soleyman had an army of people, birds, animals and Gens. He appointed the Gens to extract iron, marble and other stones from mountains. The Gens were also appointed to make castles. As the Gens were at Soleyman' service, they were sometimes called the Gens of Soleyman

1.4. Angels in Iranian Folk Tales

There are so many Iranian folk tales which are apparently taken from Islamic culture. In *1001 nights* (Elmi, 1943: 78), one of the most famous tale books, the meeting scene of a shepherd with an angel has been represented. Some angels have the same names as in religious stories but some of them are called by other names while their functions are almost the same; Pari (fairy) is one of them. If one chooses the phrase of "a winged, pure and delicate creature" as an acceptable definition for describing an angel, it is possible to recognize the similarity of an angel with a Pari. The concept of Gen was also extracted from religious culture and somehow was reformed in folk tales. There are many stories about the meetings of people of different areas with these strange creatures. The oral tales gathered by anthropologists, describe Gens with coarse figures and tarnished faces. There are other detailed descriptions about Gens which demonstrate them with short noses and yellowish eyes. In almost all stories the Gens possess hooves on their feet. People believe that the main locations of Gens are dark places such as thick woods especially under a particular tree called Van, a wild tree which

grows in mountainous areas. Many exciting stories have been narrated about the encounter of people with Gens is public baths which has been mentioned many times as their main particular place in urban areas. Some people who live in southern parts of Iran believe that Gens live under a tree called Lour or Leil whose branches and leaves are very numerous.

2. ANGELS IN THE PAINTINGS OF 18TH AND 19TH ERAS

2.1. Angels in the Painting of Safavid Era

The angels were a popular subject to be illustrated In Safavid period. One of the most favorite scenes was the "Ascension of Muhammad" which was painted in different styles (fig2). According to the religious stories, Mohammed descended to the skies at the back of Boragh, his heavenly horse, accompanied by many angels. For instance Mikael brought him Boragh from heaven when Esrafil with seven thousand angels was present. The prophet is illustrated in a green robe while wearing a veil for the sake of keeping religious respects. The direction of his hand is toward Jebril who guided him out of the painting' frame. Beautiful angels are flying around him carrying heavenly presents. One of them has a brazier in her hand scattering light. The whole atmosphere of this illustration is holy and spiritual. The angels seem to float slowly through the air. That is why many critics estimated this illustration as the most elegant painting in Islamic art. The same theme has been illustrated in Safavid period. Similar scene in Haft Orange (seven thrones) written by Jami (one of the most renowned Iranian poets), demonstrates graceful angels with very long wings (fig3). Jabil is clearly distinct from others by possessing four wings instead of two. On the other hand her beautiful hat distinguishes her from other angels. Two angles are casting the Prophet light rays while two others are offering heavenly nutrition.

2.2. Mohammed Zaman: As an Intermediator

In Safavid era, the political and commercial relationship between Iran and European countries expanded. Safavid kings invited foreign painters to their courts and they painted some portraits of the rulers and the court men. On the other hand some Iranian young men were sent abroad to learn painting, among them Mohammed Zaman was the most successful. He returned home in the last years of shah Abbas' reign and finally became one of the artists of Shah Soleyman's court. Mohammed Zaman managed to combine the main characteristics of Iranian and Italian painting in which the European elements were dominant (Zoka, 1995: 19). The most prominent factor in his art was his realistic vision taken from European Naturalism. The scene of *Ismael sacrificing*

was painted in oil by Muhammad Zaman (fig4). Jebril was illustrated with naturalistic vision whose wings were inspired from real birds. Mohammed Zaman actually imitated his natural surroundings which was quite unusual about his previous artists. Light and shadow, as well as perspective which usually help the artists to demonstrate a real image made the angel not a heavenly but an earthly creature. On the other hand demonstrating volumes instead of linear figures made the illustration more realistic.

2.3. Angels in Qajar Paintings

In Qajar era, the angels were illustrated in different styles but naturalistic vision was in common in almost all the images. Realistic atmosphere influenced by European art and 19th century social improvements altered the most important characteristic of Iranian art: imaginary world. In Qajar era (19th century) the basic essence of Iranian art was mixed with materialistic methods and the artistic expressions culminated to a pleasant combination. The painting of some beautiful angels demonstrated among leaves and flowers, dressed in Qajar costumes is one of them (fig 5). The angels' hair style is typical of Qajar women. Four semi-nude angels painted on the corners of the ceiling possess the same usual features of Qajar Style. In some of the Qajar tile-paintings, the angels were shown as the young men with the highest standards of beauty of the time (fig 6). Seven angels painted in Shiraz (Moshir Husseinieh) are part of the scene which describes the event of Karbala (Imam Hossein's martyrdom). These angels were demonstrated with a short hair, an expression of innocence on their faces and very simplified wings. Another typical image of angels is the figures which are merely summarized to a face and two wings (fig 7). The popular scene of the Prophet ascension appears in a religious place called Takieh in Kermanshah in which the angels are shown under Boragh's feet. Comparing this image with the Safavid painting, it is obvious that the angels have been visually descended from upper part of the image to a lower position (fig 8). The visual characteristics of the angels' images basically changed in 19th century in Iran. Not only the forms and methods altered fundamentally but also the main concept of angels' functions in Iranian culture changed. The transformation was due to the political and social improvements in Qajar period which was in direct connection with the vast interchanges with European culture. The process of visual and conceptual alterations in Qajar painting was driven faster with the constitutional movement. In progressive newspapers of the time, the angels were illustrated as the symbols of freedom, patriotism and constitutionalism (fig 9).

3. CONCLUSION

The angels have played a dominant role in Iranians' beliefs. They appeared in Persian myths, Iranian poems and epics, Islamic narratives and folk tales. The concepts of angels in four mentioned categories have been always interchangeable and in many cases some particular angels have been transferred from one group to another. The transformations in different periods occurred as the result of certain philosophical, social and cultural changes; for instance the concept of Pari (fairy), which was taken from Iranian myths, mixed with Islamic culture and appeared again in folk tales. The narrative aspect is one of the basic characteristics of Iranian traditional painting which was almost dominated in all periods. Iranian illustration has been always related to the literal texts and the artists tried to manifest loyally the whole atmosphere of the poets or prose texts. The illustrators made their best to demonstrate the angels as they had been described in the Iranian literature. This is true that the angels with their heavenly and intangible existence were difficult enough to be illustrated, that is why the Iranian artists were very much related to some particular texts. These popular texts as well as their imagination helped them to demonstrate these delicate and unearthly creatures. It is not probably very difficult to paint a winged woman (or man) dressed in the costumes of the time as an angel; but the hard and main point is to incarnate an imaginary creature in her unearthly atmosphere. On the other hand, illustrating the symbolic concepts of angels would be hardly possible when the whole space of the illustration was materialistic. Regarding the mentioned points, it seems that the general characteristics of Safavid painting were able to provide a suitable condition in which illustrating an angel was possible. Lack of light and shadow, absence of perspective and linear drawing instead of voluminal representation assisted the Safavid artists to present an imaginary world. In Safavid painting the inside and outside of a space were shown in the same illustration and several events were manifested coincidentally in the same frame, so the time and location as the necessary elements of naturalistic expression were not fix and exact. On the other hand, in traditional Iranian painting the objects were demonstrated from different point of view. Colors were not realistic and the artists did not care about color perspective. It is possible to claim that the objects, people and nature were not shown as they were but as they should be. The traditional artists preferred to demonstrate the utopian spaces instead of the real world, so the angels as some invisible, transparent and spiritual creatures found the possibility to be truly illustrated in Safavid paintings. The process of Naturalism in Iran, which had begun from the last decades of Safavid era, found its way to Qajar period and by the end of 19th century conquered finally traditional Iranian painting. The naturalistic visual expression could not give way to illustrating unrealistic concepts, so even though the angels were very popular to

be painted but the total atmosphere of the illustrations were completely worldly. On the other hand, for the sake of printing industry (lithography) and the constitutional movements, the different concepts of the angels were changed and they appeared in progressive newspapers as symbols of social elements. It is possible to summarize the whole process of illustrating the angels in 19th century in a short phrase: the angels descended from the skies and landed on the same ground as the earthly creatures existed.

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Figure-1: Israfil Blows the Trumpet



Figure-2: The Ascension of the Prophet



Figure-3: The Ascension of the Prophet



Figure-4: Jebril Offers a Sheep, Mohammad Zaman (A Detail)



Figure-5: A Painting for the Ceiling



Figure-6: Angels in a Tile Painting, Shiraz



Figure-7: A Detail of an Angel in a Tile Painting, Kermanshah



Figure-8: Angels in a Tile Painting, Kermanshah

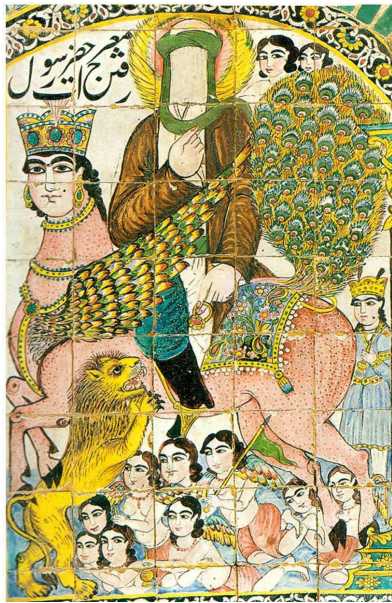


Figure-9: The Angel of Justice and Constitutionalism, Faryad Newspaper



Figure-10: The Prophet Soleyman and the Angels, Lithography, 19th Century



**Figure-11: Angels in a
Lithography Book**



**Figure-13: Israfil as the Logo of a
Newspaper**



**Figure-12: Details of the Images of
Angels**

