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## Echoes of the literary text narrative in a tree image in Herat school of painting

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### Abstract

**Problem Definition:** The mystical life, larger sizes, long life, death and life renewal, have caused the tree to have different meanings and sometimes even in ancient times to be sanctified as a mediator between human being and God and introduced as a symbol of freshness, peace and beauty, reflection of the relationship between God and human being, symbol of the whole tangible world, combination of heaven, earth and water and a symbol of light. In painting, especially the Herat school, the different functions of the tree images are observable. The present research addresses the different function of the tree image in the painting of this school.

**Objective:** The present research aims to acquire more knowledge about and be aware of the visual possibilities of the tree in Herat school.

**Research Method:** Based on a descriptive-analytic manner and then the adaptation of narrative, incident, text and image and using library and archival resources, the present study has examined the paintings of Herat school.

**Results:** In this research, it was found that the image of a tree in Herat painting, in addition to the “decorative” and “symbolic” functions, points out to the incident of painting alongside the text and echoes the main story in a visual form. In this way, the image of the withered tree is a reflection of the death narrative of the fictional character while that of the blossoming one reflects the narrative of hope, as well as shadow spreading. Also, the tree reflects the story of the king’s power and glory.

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**Keywords:** Iranian painting, Herat school, Tree.

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### Introduction

The tree conveys a lot of concepts while confronting the human being's meaningful mind. The oldest image of the tree is the cosmic tree whose tip is in the sky, rooted in the earth and its heart is the place of fire, sun, moon and stars are in the mass of its branches (De Beaucorps, 2008, 8). The sanctification of tree in ancient Iran, attribution of trees to special gods and guarding the tree of life by two animals, being a frequent motif for the figurative structure of Iran, highlights the visual and semantic importance of the tree in the visual tradition of this land. In this regard, the pictorial objects, such as trees, have specific cultural backgrounds and concepts within the paintings, from the artist's point of view. When the painter of Herat school (or other schools) illustrates a tree from a written text, he is not naturally irrespective on those cultural concepts. It must be stated that the painter did not have a static view of the internal objects of the image. The problem is that in the painting, especially in the Herat school, there are artworks that reflect the painter's perspective from the use of the tree's image. This function is neither decorative nor a reaction to vacuum phobia. The present research seeks to answer the question that how and in what way the visual expressive capacity of the tree, which has always had various expressive functions in various forms, including codes and symbols, has been changed and used in Herat painting since ancient times.

### Research Method

The present research article has examined the drawings of Herat school in a descriptive-analytical manner and then based on the adaptation of narrative, incident of the text and image and using library and archival resources.

### Research Background

So far, no research has been conducted on the illustration of the role of tree in echoing the incident of the written narrative of the literary text in the schools of painting. The relevant researches have generally focused on the visual or symbolic features of the tree. Regarding the diverse presence of tree in paintings, one can point out to the studies on the visual characteristics of trees in Iranian painting" by Najafi and Afshari (2011), mythical role of the tree in Iranian garden painting by Moattar (2008) as well as the role and symbolic meanings of cypress tree (Sarv) in miniatures of "Tahmasbi Shahnameh" by Al Ebrahim Dehkordi (2016). However, the difference is that the present study is neither a mythical view nor limited to the type of tree. Also, the tree-related symbols are quoted from the book "Les symboles vivants" by Monique de Beaucorps.

### The expressive effects of the tree in the visual culture of Iran

Throughout the history, human beings have directed their perceptions of the world towards symbolism, coding and decoding, in order to express their material and

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spiritual feelings. Thus, some objects in the world, in addition to their usual meaning, reflect a meaning or meanings beyond themselves for an individual, and the tree is no exception. In different periods, plants and trees become containers to express some concepts that human being is unable to express explicitly. One casts his/her ideas in the form of plants and trees and gives it a cryptic quality. The transcendental ideas, which are neither definable nor perceptible, are received when the human mind begins to explore the realm of symbolism (Yung, 1999, 15). In this regard, one can divide the concept of tree into two groups of symbolic trees and visual symbols of it. Trees, in the face of the symbolic human mind, both manifest themselves as symbols and their images in the works are reminiscent of symbols. The example image of the tree is the product of a mass of mysteries that have spread to countless branches and created countless concepts in the context of various myths, religions, arts, literature and civilizations. The tree in its earliest image, in the early myths, is a huge cosmic tree, whose tip is in the heaven, roots are on the earth's surface, branches cover the whole world, and the sun, moon and stars are like its fruits. Also, the fertility deity is associated with the cosmic tree (De Beaucorps, 2008, 8-9).

This symbol has also had a practical aspect in daily life so that the pillars, wooden beams, branches and everything that is associated with snakes, birds, stars, fruits and lunar animals are the symbol of the tree (Copper, 2000, 145) (See Figure 1). The plant was also sanctified in ancient Iran so that every god has had a plant and every plant has had a god. For example, "Red Cheiri" flower is dedicated to Soroush Izad, "Lemon Balm" to Sepandarmaz and "Marjoram" to Arda Vahishta (Gholizadeh, 2009, 154, 200).

Other symbols include the tree of life, haoma tree, palm tree, cedar, citrus, cypress, vine and sycamore. The tree of life (See Figure 2), the evergreen tree, is always blossoming and gentle, whose fruits bring eternity and immortality. This tree is the great one which is the existence of all trees and a symbol of fertility. The tree is symbolically bisexual. It represents the image of the eternal pattern of father in the form of long stem rising in the sky, while being the reminiscent of the eternal pattern of the fertile mother in the form of a leafy tree and the nest of birds. Sometimes it is considered as the initial male-female (Chevalier & Gerberan, 2003, 198).

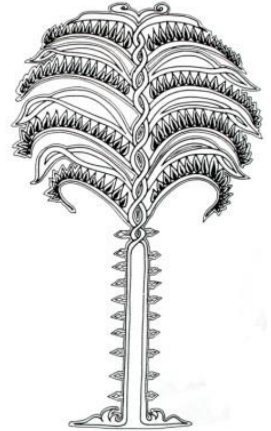


Figure 1

The cosmic tree, from medieval painting. Source: De Beaucorps, 2008, 10

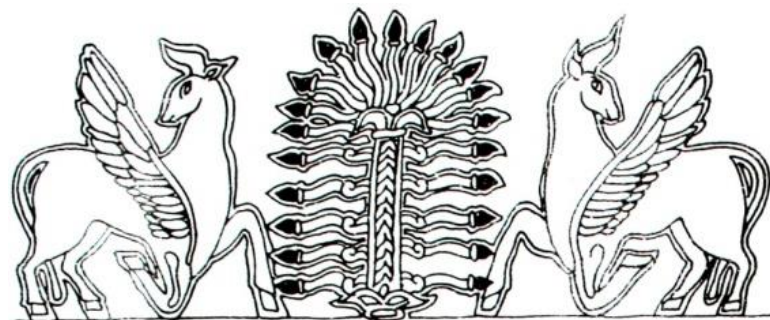


Figure 2

The tree of life, Assyrian reliefs. Source: De Beaucorps, 2008, 13.

In most religious texts, the “haoma tree” is mentioned as a life-giving, pain killer and anti-disease tree and leader of the plants. In other sources, haoma has been considered to be the same as the European ash tree. In Avesta, haoma is seen in both forms of human being (god) and plant (Bakhshi, 2003, 62). Hoama, which is sanctified in religious ceremonies, is a mythical plant which grows at the bottom of the “Farakhkard” sea and next to the tree of “Vispobish” and brings immortality and will be used in the reconstruction of the world (Farshgard). The palm tree has an ancient history in Mesopotamia and Iran. In ancient Iran, it was a sacred tree and its fruits had a fertile aspect. The palm tree was also known as the tree of life during the Achaemenid and Sassanid eras.

In Assyrian art, half-human and half-animal creatures can be observed on either side of a tree that they seem to be guarding, or two antelopes are seen grazing the sacred tree. Sometimes a winged human (Farvashi) motif is observed above the king’s head, horizontally, with two tall palms standing on either side of him, the presence of which emphasizes the support of the king by the holy forces. Similar images can be abundantly seen in the art of ancient Iran (Amoozgar, 2002, 87; Bakhshi, 2003, 72). No information is available about the symbolic and cryptic concepts of cedar tree before Islam. However, due to the presence of the motifs of this plant on prehistoric pottery and Sassanid earthenware (including the Sassanid bronze vase decorated with the motifs of cedar leaves), it is possible that the mythological role of this plant in Islamic traditions is rooted in pre-Islamic myths (Bakhshi, 2003, 87).

In Iranian mythology, vine and blood are symbols of blood and life, respectively. In one of the Manichaean rock temples, the tree of life is seen with bunches of grapes. In this image, Manichaean clerics worship in a respectful manner (Bakhshi, 2003, 73). In the Achaemenid government, the remnants of ancient indigenous matriarchal rituals was remaining, according to which the monarchy continues through women. The vine that turns around the sycamore tree can be considered a symbol of blood and permanence of the Achaemenid Empire. In fact, the sycamore tree was the symbol of the ruler and vine was that of his wife, through whom the blood of the monarchy lasted (Farbood, 2002, 47).

### The obligation of text illustration in Iranian painting

First of all, it should be mentioned that the visual narrative in painting, before Safavid period, was a reflection of the narration of literary, scientific and historical text (Pakbaz, 2000, 54). The history of Iranian visual art is correlated with the pen, which itself is associated with the plants, and Iranian visual art is correlated with the word and the meaning as a consequence. The ultimate goal of the lord of the two pens is to illustrate the text, as readers may pay attention to the word and the image together. They read the word and then look at the pictures, and maybe vice versa. However, the point is that the word and the image move forward shoulder to shoulder (Liman, 2012, 256). Prior to Safavid era, the Iranian painting was in line

with the illustration of the literary texts. From the Safavid period onwards, the disruption of the obligation to make illustration from the written text is observed. For this reason, since the Safavid era, one can observe the emergence of single paintings free of any connection with the book (Azhand, 2014, 106). Thus, the painter's obligation to adhere to the text was eliminated and in fact, the link between literature and painting was weakened (Pakbaz, 2000, 124). This trend also continued in the Qajar era and the relationship between painting and literature declined. In this period, the oil painting replaced miniature and a kind of European imitation of landscapes, mountains, clouds and trees behind people while preserving the clothing adornments became common in the painting (Vaziri, 1961, 200).

### Landscaping and natural landscapes in painting

Throughout the history of painting, landscaping and creating nature have existed in most paintings. These landscapes and nature were illustrated in an idealistic and imaginative way. The landscape of garden and orchard is a frequent theme in the Iranian visual arts. The inclusion of trees and water in Islamic art, is one of the themes that has been of great importance in the illustrated versions of the book. The tree also followed the same formal rules of stylization, decoration, negation of depth and so on. As an archetype, the tree actually connects the three levels of the world. Since its roots sink to the ground and its branches rise to the sky, the tree has been recognized as a sign of the connection between earth and sky. In this sense, the tree has a central and self-governing state, to the extent that the cosmic tree is synonymous with the axis of the world. According to its pivotal meaning, the tree naturally indicates an ascending path which is the passage of those who are transferred from the visible to the invisible (Chevalier & Gerberan, 2003, 189). In fact, the tree connects the "lower world" with the "upper world".

In the seventh century AH, The branches of the plants were decorated with ivy and two-dimensional flowers. At the end of the Ilkhanid period, "Tang painting" influenced the landscape elements of painting, including the tree, so that one can observe the knotted trunks of trees as well as the moss-like cover on the mountains. In the late eighth century AH, new events took place in the landscape images of painting by Junaid, among which one can mention the use of a free Chinese perspective, leaving diagonal planes behind each other, greatness of nature due to the reduction of the dimensions of human motifs (Keyvani, 2003, 107). In the "Shiraz School", Chinese traditions were also abandoned and the human and animal bodies were given higher importance than the landscape. Then, in the ninth century AH contemporaneous with Timurid era, with the brilliant appearance of Kamal al-Din Behzad in Herat and the attention to the "Ming style" in the painting of Herat school as well as the influences of Baghdad and Tabriz schools, a pragmatic view of nature and showing details has been emphasized (Dimand, 1986, 56). Although Behzad considered nature as a mere background for the occurrence of events for human beings, a masterful view of nature and

landscape prevailed by observing details (Ettinghausen & Yarshater, 2000, 260). In Tabriz school, colorful plants, huge and flowering trees are also present everywhere in the painting. The coral reefs are sometimes drawn in the form of human or animal. In the second half of the tenth century AH, old trees with knotted branches can be observed in Mashhad school. In "Isfahan school, with the decreasing attention of the art supporters to painting, a contentment can be seen in the number of trees and plant decorations in the paintings (Maleki, 2008, 77).

There are two types of functions for the tree illustration in Iranian painting. Sometimes the tree image is used symbolically and sometimes decoratively. In this research, it is shown that the image of the tree in the painting echoes the incident of the narration of the literary text. It should be mentioned that the present study only investigates this issue in the paintings of the Herat school. However, prior to that, a few examples of decorative and symbolic expressions of the tree in Iranian painting are mentioned as well.

### Examples of decorative and symbolic expressions of the tree in Iranian painting

The image of the tree (and landscape) in Iranian painting has more decorative and functional aspects and it may not be easy to follow the conceptual aspects, especially the symbolic meanings of the tree in them. There has always been a creative perception of reality in the painting, which is also observable in the garden and landscape painting. This might be the reason for their imaginary feature because nature has not been a source of imitation but that of inspiration. According to (Nasr, 2010, 126), garden in Iranian painting is an emphasis on the nature worship. Decoration was also employed in the design of plants and animals, which caused the elimination of the naturalistic aspect of the tree. The natural shape and nature of any tree or animal or plant is not removed in the design and this is observed in various ways such as the special design of fruits and leaves, blooms and branches. Less exaggeration was observed in the early periods of painting, while the curvature and twisting of the trees was exaggerated to some extent in the Ilkhanid period. In the second school of Tabriz, Mashhad, Qazvin, local and Isfahan schools, the design of the trees becomes much formed and the exaggeration in their twist is clearly visible. In addition, stylization plays an important role in decorating the trees. Simplification of the mass of leaves or fruits and body texture preserves the essence of the tree (Najafi & Afshari, 2011, 83). Also, painters in different eras have depicted the tree shapes closer to the nature and have sometimes painted them completely abstract and exemplary (Saleh Shoushtari & Shirazi, 2008, 6).

For example, one can mention the cypress tree motif, which is depicted in various forms in painting. The cypress is called an evergreen and is a symbol of spring, although some consider it to be dependent on the moon. Zarathustra mentions a kind of cypress in the Avesta and calls it as paradise tree, whose leaf is knowledge

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and whoever tastes its fruit will be everlasting. According to the narrations, Zarathustra brought this tree from heaven and planted it in front of the fire temple. The cypress tree has been known as the tree of life. As depicted by Figures 3-5, the cypress tree has been used in various symbolic forms in the painting, including the symbols of the eternal flame, height, endurance and eternity (Ghasemieh, Bemanian & Nasehi, 2016, 79-84).



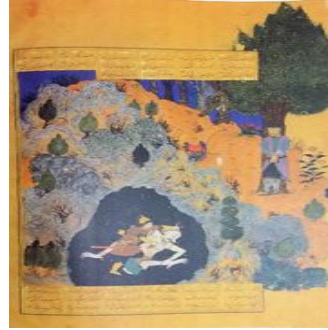
**Figure 3.**

The role of cypress in the painting of the capture of Kiani Crown and killing of lions by Bahram. Here, the cypress tree symbolizes the perpetual flame and the similarity between cypress form and flame is observable  
Source: Hosseini Rad; Parhizgari; Parishanzadeh & Karbasi, 2005, 335



**Figure 4.**

The role of cypress in the painting of Homay and Homayoun of Jalabari school. Here, cypress is a symbol of height, beauty, symmetry and endurance.  
Source: Graber, 2011, 67.



**Figure 5**

The role of cypress in the painting of the battle between Rostam and China's Xaqan. The huge and old cypress is a symbol of eternity, stability and immortality.  
Source: Hosseini Rad; Parhizgari; Parishanzadeh & Karbasi 2005, 47.

Another example can be observed in a painting illustrated in the Shiraz school. It is written in the painting "Alexander meets a wise man" from an anthology for "Jalal al-Din Iskander bin Omar Shaikh" in the Shiraz school, where one can observe a tree blossoming at the highest point of the painting. These blossoms are the blossoms of hope that are mentioned in the poem. The wise sage tells a story in which the king's sick wife recovers. At the same time, he was informed about the health of Alexander's wife. Here, the blossoming tree is the echo of a literary narrative in a visual aspect indicating the recovery of life (after the winter death) (Dekhoda, 1963, 1688).

### The image of the tree, the echo of the literary text narrative

Herat school, founded by Moin al-Din Shahrokh Timuri (807-850 AH), was developed during the period of Sultan Husain Baiyqra and declined in 900 AH with the invasion of the Uzbeks. The workshop tradition which was the achievement of the arrival of the Ilkhans in Iran continued during this period, and the work room

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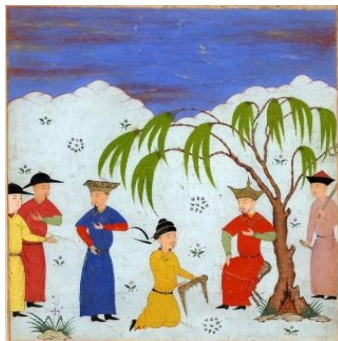
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of Baysunghur Mirza and then that of Sultan Husain Bayiqra became the center of activity for the artists of Herat school. Baysunghur Mirza established the “Dar al-Sanayeh” of bookmaking in Herat and then brought the first-rate artists such as Jafar Tabrizi (head of the library), Ghavam al-Din (volume and illuminator), Pir Ahmad Baghshamali, Mir Khalil and Khajeh Ghias al-Din to this region. Afterwards, Kamal al-Din Behzad emerged in this school and became the rarity of the century. Herat school is very important in the history of visual art due to the visual structure strength. Some studies (Hasanpour, 1998, 1-12) introduce it as a paradigm in the visual arts. The reflective expression of narrative by the tree image can be observed in some paintings of the Herat school such as the painting of “Chinese scholars, named Litachi and Maxon bring Oljaito books on history” (See Figure 7). In this painting, which is written from a historical text, Oljaito leans under the shadow of a tree, and the scene is as if his power has overshadowed the whole world like the shadow of a tree.

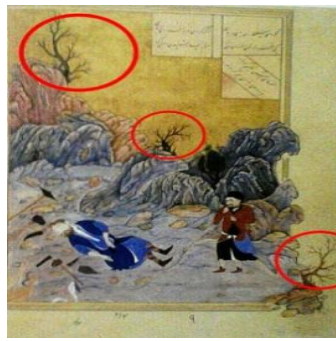
On the other hand, as can be seen from this image, the king, with all his glory and courage, has allowed these scientists to enter his privacy. This artwork also points out to the “paying attention” as the meaning of “shadow spreading” (Dehkhoda, 1998, 951). Besides, the image of the tree here reflects the narrative of a special meeting in which one side is the king (shadow spreader) and the other side is people at a lower level. The artist’s clever choice of the tree type to illustrate the highest shading surface is also significant. Another example is the painting entitled “Farhad’s Death” (See Figure 8), a copy of Khamsah of Nizami, which has been illustrated in 930 AH in the school of Herat. Farhad, who was madly in love with Shirin, dies because of the false news of Shirin’s death. Nizami says in Khamsah: In this poem, the poet has depicted Farhad’s death in the form of a mountain falling. However, the painter has cleverly used another image, i.e.



**Figure 6.** “Alexander meets a wise man” from an anthology for “Jalal al-Din Iskander bin Omar Shaikh”, Shiraz school  
Source: [Canby, 2010, 52](#).



**Figure 7.** “Chinese scholars, named Litachi and Maxon, bring Oljaito books on history”, Hafiz-i Abru, Herat school  
Source: [Canby, 2010, 57](#).



**Figure 8.** “Farhad’s death”, the hamsah of Nizami illustrated in 930 AH, British National Library, Herat School  
Source: [Graber, 2011, 70](#).



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“the drying of the tree” to express death. “Drying” of a tree refers to the death (Dehkhoda, 1998, 809). In this picture, the withered tree, beyond the natural drying process, is the echo of the incident in the literary text narrative, the main theme of which is Farhad’s or Shirin’s death (because the poet has used a falling cypress tree in the poem to demonstrate Shirin’s death). The deaths have been echoed in the form of three withered trees at the top, middle and bottom of the painting. Several other examples can be found in the painting of Herat school, in which the tree stands for the echo of the literary text narrative and represents the death:

**Example (a).** The painting “Bahram Gor kills the dragon” (See Figure 9), painted by Behzad (1490 AD) in the Herat school which is kept in UK. The death of the dragon, is already reflected in the image in the form of a withered tree.

**Example (b).** “The killing of the dragon by Bahram” from Muhammad Juki’s Shahnameh, Herat school (1444 AD), which is kept in London (See Figure 10). In this image, the incident of death in the narrative of the literary text, has been echoed in the form of three withered trees and has added to the visual and conceptual richness of the painting.

**Example (c).** In the painting “Gorvi separates Siavash’s head from the body” from Muhammad Juki’s Shahnameh, Herat School (1444 AD) in London (See Figure 11), Gorvi brings a golden plate and separates the head from Siavash’s body (Ferdowsi, 1989, vol. 1, 566). In this painting, unlike other examples, a large tree is cut from the trunk, which causes it to wither. This, in fact, is the echo of the beheading incident of Siavash and his death.



**Figure 9.** “Bahram Gor kills the dragon” by Behzad (1490 AD), Herat School, British Library. Source: [Keyvani, 2003, 102.](#)



**Figure 10.** “The killing of the dragon by Bahram”, Muhammad Juki’s Shahnameh, Herat school (1444 AD), London. Source: [sites.asiasociety.org.](#)



**Figure 11.** “Gorvi separates Siavash’s head from the body”, Muhammad Juki’s Shahnameh, Herat school (1444 AD), London. Source: [oyalasiaticcollections.org.](#)

It is necessary to mention that the image of the withered tree, which reflects the literary text narrative, has also been used in other schools of painting. For example, one can point out to the painting “The killing of the dragon by Bahram” from

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Ferdowsi Shahnameh (1580 AD) in the school of Mashhad or Qazvin, which is kept in the private collection of Qotb al-Din Hasan al-Tuni (See Figure 12). Such a reflection of the literary narrative in the image of the tree is also observable in the paintings with the themes of the white demon, Zahhak and Siavash. For example, the painting "The killing of the white demon by Rostam" from Shahnameh of Shah Ismail II belonging to Qazvin school (1576 AD) which is kept in the British Museum (See Figure 13) and also the painting "Zahhak is nailed to Mount Damavand" in the school of Shiraz (1430 AD) which is kept in London (See Figure 14), are examples in which the image of a tree echoes the death in the literary narrative.



Figure 12.

"The killing of the dragon by Bahram", Ferdowsi Shahnameh (1580 AD), Mashhad or Qazvin school, private collection of Qotb al-Din Hasan al-Tuni. Source: Moghbeli & Payamani, 2016, 219.



Figure 13.

The killing of the white demon by Rostam »Shahnameh of Shah Ismail II of Qazvin school (1576 AD) in the British Museum. Source: [ommons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org).



Figure 14.

"Zahhak is nailed to Mount Damavand", Teymuri, Shiraz school (1430 AD), London Source: [Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ouseley Add. 176, fol. 30r.](https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk)

## Conclusion

The tree has taken many meanings in the thinking of Iran. Belief in the tree as a symbol of eternal life has spread since the Sumerians, where the center of the universe was a tree that was both the guardian of the world and the source of other trees, fruits and even animals. In addition to being a symbol of freshness, peace and beauty, trees reflect the relationship between God and human being and are considered as the symbol of the whole objective world, the combination of heaven, earth and water, dynamic life, manifestation of the whole universe and a symbol of the spiritual mercy and enlightenment. Hence, in Iranian culture, the garden is considered as the best place to connect with the lofty world, believing that it is located between the terrestrial nature and the ideal world (eternal clarity). Among the art works of this region, painting, especially that of Herat school, is one of the most brilliant manifestations of the visual art. Since the tree plays an important role in the material and spiritual life of human beings in this land, the research results on the function of the tree image in this school of painting are of great importance. According to the conducted investigations, three functional

titles was found for the image of the tree in the painting of Herat school, including “symbolic”, “decorative” and “echo of the incident in the literary text narrative”. The tree image, in addition to symbolic and decorative representations, also reflects the incident of the narrative in terms of a visual action. This can be acknowledged by the observation of a withered tree wherever death casts a shadow over the main character of the story (dragon, white demon and Zahhak), which visually reflects the death in the literary text narrative. Also, the incident of a literary text narrative which emphasizes hope appears in the form of a blossoming tree and shadow spreading, and the kingdom manifestation of Oljaito appears in the painting through the shadow of a tree. The function of the tree image as an echo of the literary text narrative incident indicates the artist’s ingenuity in using a natural element. Thus, the natural phenomenon of the tree, in addition to being present as a part of the garden and landscape in the paintings and sometimes as decorative and symbolic forms, is also present in Herat painting as an important element in the literary text narrative.

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