



Notes on Shirani's Laila Majnun Illustrated for Mohammad Shah Rangila

Sadia Pasha Kamran *

*Sr. Professor Government College University, Lahore. sadiapashakamran@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Submitted 13.03.2024 Accepted 07.06.2024 Published 30.06.2024 Volume No. 11 Issue No. I ISSN (Online) 2414-8512 ISSN (Print) 2311-293X DOI: Keywords: Illustrated Manuscript, Arts of the Book, Miniature Painting, Later Mughal Art, Persian Poetry in India, Rajput Painting, Provincial Painting	<i>The study is a stylistic investigation and a critical analysis of a previously undocumented illustrated manuscript of Laila Majnun. In doing so, it traces the development of book art in the Indian Subcontinent from antiquity to the later Mughal period. Various religious streams in India add up to the status of the book which is considered to be a sacred entity. Books are the portable treasures that help explain the complex issues of transculturation between different societies. These cultural influences speak of a fair and free intellectual cross-over between Persia, India and subsequent regional and provincial centers while establishing hegemony of Persian literature in Mughal India. Employing the pre-modern historiographic methodologies and relying upon the visual imagery as primary sources the study characterizes the later Mughal and provincial style as it metamorphoses from the luxurious, collectable imperial items to the everyday pocket size reader.</i> 

Introduction

History of Book Illustration in India

India, over the time, has served as the cradle of almost all the main religions being practiced today in the world. It is the birthplace of Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Sikhism. In addition to that, popular historic accounts confer India's introduction to Judaism in the antiquity (Salapak 27) and to Christianity during the 1st century AD (Hedlund iii) followed by Islam as early as the times of the prophet Mohammad PBUH (Nimrod 257). With the religions come the sacred word, the sacred scripture and the sacred book along with the art of illumination and illustration of the same. Thus, the art of the book, here in India, was practiced with a religious fervor and flourished as an important cultural trait.

The recorded tradition of book illustration, in India begins with the Jain manuscripts and the Buddhist Pala paintings both done on palm leaves. The credit for introducing paper to India goes to the Muslims of Baghdad who also brought the Persian love and passion of illustrating secular literature to India, as the figural representation of the book of God-the Quran was discouraged. It is this zeal and obsession for painting that laid the foundations of the Mughal School as early as the 1540's when emperor Humayun set up his atelier supervised by none other than legendary Persian artists, Abdul Samad and Mir Sayyid Ali. The coming generations of Mughal emperors carried on the legacy of patronizing the art and one witnesses some of the marvelous examples of illustrated manuscripts in the form of *Tutinama*, *Hamzanama*, *Baburnama* and *Akbanama* that display the mastery of the craft as well as the development of the art of the book during the Mughal India.

Laila Majnun: The Poem

Laila Majnun, also called *The Madman and Layla* is a 7th Century Arabian love story. It got popularized when adopted by the Nizami Ganjavi (12th-century Persian poet). It is the third part of his five long narrative

poems popularly known as *Khamsa of Nizami*. Nizami's work was also imitated further several times. Some of these works stand as original literary works in their own right e.g. Amir Khusrow Dehlavi's (14th century) and Jami's (15th century) versions. The manuscript in hand is Abdullah Hatefi's (15th century) version. The main plot of *Laila Majnun*, with little variations in detail, remains similar in most of these versions. Qais, who is known as Majnun falls in love with Laila, a childhood friend. After reaching adolescence Laila's father forbids any contact. Majnun becomes obsessed with her, hence his sobriquet *Majnun* which literally means 'possessed'. Laila gets married to another man and moves to Iraq while Majnun abandons the tribe and wanders in the wilderness. On the other side, Laila gets sick and dies. Ultimately Majnun is also found dead on the grave of an unknown woman, possibly Laila's. While the story appears to be an anecdote of virgin love, mystics used stories about *Majnun* to illustrate technical mystical concepts such as *fanaa* (annihilation), *divānagi* (love-madness) and self-sacrifice.

Shirani's *Laila Majnun*

Shirani's *Laila Majnun*, named after its donor, is a pocket-size (6x8 inches) manuscript in the Punjab University Library Collection. It is an illustrated manuscript of the later Mughal Period and as noted in its colophon [Fig 1], made for Mohammad Shah Rangila in 1148 Hijri (1737 AD). The manuscript is in vertical format with a total of 80 folios. There are twenty-two illustrations. Sizes of illustrations vary, most of them are slightly smaller than half of the page with text on the rest of it. On unpolished biscuit-colored paper, the text is written in two columns. The rows are cloud-shaped, consistent and well-formed *Nasta'liq* in black ink is encased within these clouds. The spaces between the clouds are filled with liquid gold. The text and the illustrations are enclosed within a neat red inner liner followed by a thicker middle line in gold and black outer rule.



[Fig.1] Detail, Colophon, *Shirani's Laila Majnun*, Main Library, Punjab University.

Research Methodology

As the study is a stylistic investigation it is mandatory to survey the iconography of previously documented and analyzed manuscripts. Sampling of illustrations and visuals are done in terms of regional and provincial schools. The trail is traced back to Saffavid Persian, Mughal and then sub-imperial or provincial traditions. In addition to that typical Indian- Jain and Buddhist influences are also taken into consideration. The visuals are studied in socio-political and cultural references in order to contrive more appropriate interpretations that must help ascertain the style and provenance of the manuscript in question.

Literature Review

In India, since the Sultanate period (12th century onwards), Persian literature was transcribed and illustrated which included paintings usually from the Persian prototype. The painting styles that emerged during the early Mughal period included elements of previously established styles of Hindu, Persian and even European painting. Richard Ettinghausen observes that

In its early stages, painting under the Mughal rulers of India owed much to Persian painting, but it soon developed a style and point of view entirely of its own. This phenomenon was probably in large measure due to the wide range of cultural interests of the emperor Akbar (1556-1605) and

his encouragement of the fusion of different artistic sources in his court ateliers. (11)

John Marshal while writing about the cultural integration of “Muslims and Indians” in *Cambridge History of India* confirms “the varying contrasts which existed between them, the wide divergence as their culture and religions make the history of their impact particularly instructive” (Marshal 567). It is also true that many influences in an onward march from Arabia to Persia and Central Asia assimilated on their way to India. Of these countries Persia has had a dominant influence on Islam and through it these influences reached India. Abdul Qadir in his essay on “The Cultural Influences of Islam” mentions the Hindu scholars of Kashmir who were proficient in Persian language and literature.” (Qadir 287). He also notices “a large majority of educated people in India, even among the non-Muslims believe in one God as the Creator and Preserver of the Universe with no rivals and no equals” (290). It is important to note that Muslim patronage of Persian poetry and book illustration was responsible for developing the tastes, the standards of craftsmanship and imaginative scope of millions of people all over India.

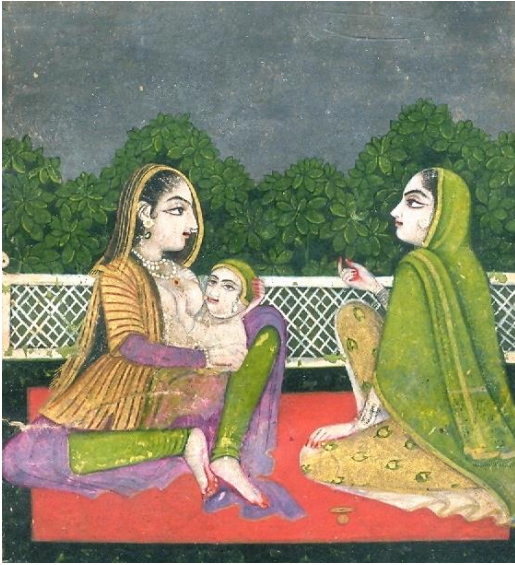
Asok Kumar Das in his book *Mughal Paintings during Jahangir Time*, most eloquently defines the characteristics of Mughal Painting on the basis of which the development of style from Persian to Akbari (early Mughal style) and Jahangiri Period (later Mughal) can be traced. Features of Persian Painting as defined by Das include the golden sky, stylized multi-colored piled up rocks, profusion of blooming shrubs, trees with dried up branches outside birds, effeminate youths heads popping up behind the hillocks or buildings, deep bright monochromes in dresses and depiction of architectural details showing inscriptions and decorative designs (51). This is why Eleanor Sims finds the Persian painting “energetically charged, frantically composed in which inanimate landscape is as active as animate life”. He further calls them as “complex pictures, imaginative in compositions and refined in style, execution and coloring”

Transculturation in Mughal India

Emperor Akbar’s atelier comprised of hundred artists as reported by the court historian Abul Fadl in *Ain- i Akbari*. After Akbar, Jahangir focused on specialization and reduced the number of artists at the court. The released artists from the imperial court migrated to provincial kingdoms where they received patronage from the provincial officials. Later, Aurangzeb’s disinterest in book art compelled the artists associated with the royal atelier to look for patrons who had a taste for the art and money to support it. The development of style during the later Mughal period owes a lot to this cross-culturation and *Shirani’s Laila Majnun* is a good example of such a transfusion.

Pictorial Narratives in Shirani’s Laila Majnun

The compositions i.e. the arrangements of different forms within the picture space and the facial features of *Shirani’s Laila Majnun* are typical of the Rajput school of painting (Fig. 2). Goswamy credits Ananda Coomaraswamy for introducing the term ‘Rajput’ painting as a nomenclature that stands for Hindu paintings from Rajasthan and Pahari States (100). During the sixteenth century Rajput painting substantially changed under the influence of Mughal painting however, the two main characteristics from the pre-Mughal period were carried forward. Firstly, the flatness of form and second the bright colour palette are reminiscent of Jain and Buddhist manuscript paintings. As a result, to the said cross-culturation that happened after Akbar’s period, Rajput painting exhibits Mughal influence. It is noted that the treatment of figures in these paintings are essentially Mughalised. *Shirani’s Laila Majnun* is one example. The colour palette and a horizontal division of space in form of successive bands is typical of Rajput painting [See Fig 3] while the form and volume of figures and their expressions reminds one of the Mughal style. It is Mughal painting alone that consistently recognizes, acknowledges and investigates the individuality and personal uniqueness of the people it portrays” (Beach 127).

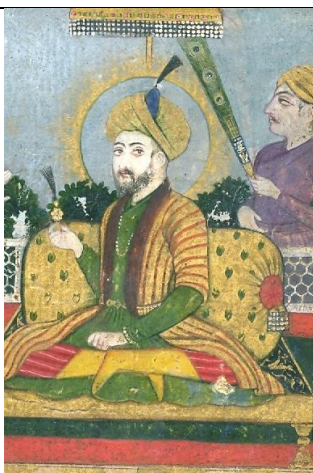


[Fig. 2] *Two women on terrace*. Shirani's *Laila Majnun*, Main Library, Punjab University.



[Fig 3] *Ragaputra Velavala of Bhairava*, Folio from a *Ragamalaserie*. Basohli, c. 1707–1715. [Art Gallery of New South Wales](#).

To Anjan Chakravati “the very roots of Mughal naturalism and a concern for details, meticulous and pulsating with life, may be traced to Babur’s remarkable alertness to nature” (23). Following this scheme, the *Amīr* here (Fig 4), appears graceful in his manners and sacred in his attributes with a halo around his head. The halo, as a symbol of divinity was incorporated into Mughal painting in Emperor Jahangir’s studio [Fig 5]. It was borrowed from Christian art where Christ, Madona or other imperial figures were painted in the same manner. The *Ustād* looks learned [Fig 6] humble in his manner and dress which clearly represents the *suffa*, a coarse cloth usually worn by Sufis and dervishes. Majnun is a handsome youth, full of life, vivid and pulsating. Laila is innocent, modest yet beautiful. The scene changes and the love departs, Majnun’s figure now exhibits craving [Fig 7]. He befriends the animals and finds solace in their company. Laila displays the Indian version of Persian mystical beauty as compared to Indian ideals of beauty exemplified in Yakshis carved in stone.



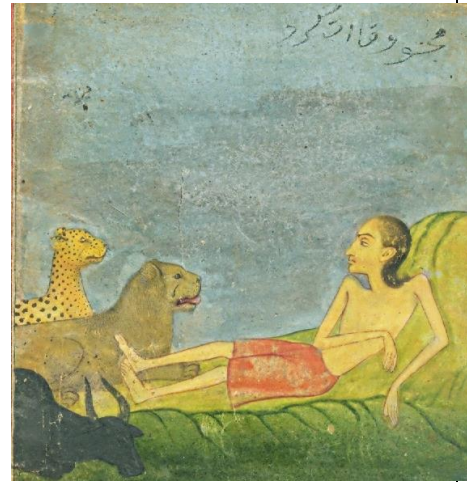
[Fig 4] *Amir on his throne*, Shirani's *Laila Majnun*, Main Library, Punjab University.



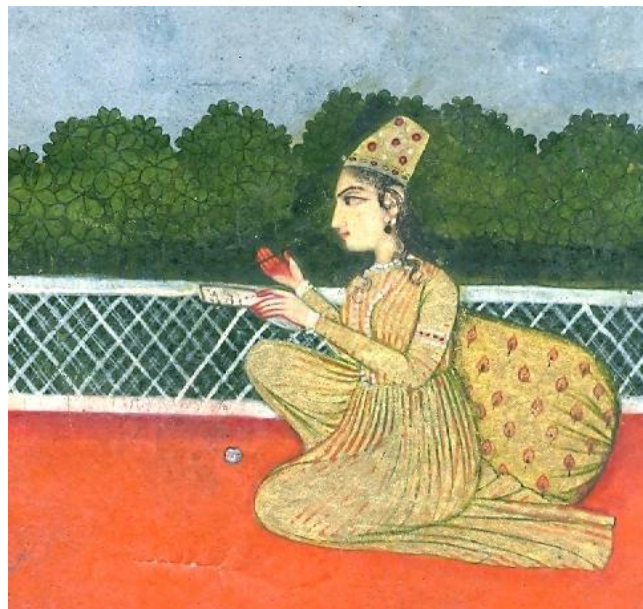
[Fig 5] *Jahangir*, Mughal 18th Century, The Walter Museum, Creative Commons



[Fig 6] *Laila Majnun with Ustād (right) Shirani's Laila Majnun*, Main Library, Punjab University.



[Fig. 7] *Majnun in wilderness, Shirani's Laila Majnun*, Main Library, Punjab University.



[Fig 8] *Laila as an emblem of mystical love, Shirani's Laila Majnun*, Main Library, Punjab University.

Unlike the sensuous and exotic Indian prototypes, this Laila [Fig 8] de-materialises and de-naturalises the female figure as a symbol of a higher reality and mystical love that points towards the beauty and love of God. This thought was already embraced in Early Mughal painting. *Ain-i Akbari* speaks of this mindset as Akbar believed in painting being a source of recognition of God's creative skill. He says and Abul Fadl quotes:

It appears to me as if a painter has quite peculiar skills of recognizing God; for a painter in sketching anything that has life and in devising its limbs, one after the other, must come to

feel that he cannot bestow individuality upon his work and is thus forced to think of God, the giver of life and will thus increase his knowledge. (114)

Another element peculiar to the Mughal style was a keen observation and loving depiction of nature – trees, flowers and animals. Richard Ettinghausen would find such representation “less idealized and more intimately presented than in Persian art” (1975, 16). Thus, the figures which confirm the naturalistic Mughal approach contrast the more realistic rendering of the animals. As far as the expressions are concerned the animals too seem gloomy and sad as they mourn along with Majnun. This concept of investigating the natural world is peculiar to Mughal traits and was unknown to pre-Mughal Indian traditions of painting in general and the Rajput courts in particular.

Clothes and robes are also Mughal in style and as compared to half sleeves, transparent Rajasthani short blouses women are draped in Persian style gowns while the turbans are of plain cloth as in Mughal style while the typical Rajasthani printed or tied and dyed fabric is also apparent. The cushions are of patterned fabric with patent block print motifs. The feather in the Caliph’s turban reminds of the Mughal *surpech*. *Laila’s* head crown is again Persian rather than Arabic which displays artists’ concern and acknowledgment of the original source of the story.

Interestingly, unlike the scenes of horror, violence and overtly busy posh courts of the Mughal emperors, these paintings are set in a peaceful rather calm ambience. These paintings demonstrate the debt of Rajasthani paintings (Jaipur and Bundi) in compositions and distribution of different forms on the surface. Also, the architectural features are typical Rajasthani, with terraces and cornices unlike the appearance of the whole building through the eye-pie perspective as favored by the Mughal school.

Tracing the Development of Style: From Mughal to Provincial

In India, towards the end of the Mughal Empire, two artistic traditions converged. This first style was an outcome of Rajput culture. It can be characterized by exuberant, vibrant colours and bold patterns. The subject matter was Hindu myths and epics. On the other hand, the second style was favoured by entirely different Islamic Mughal invaders and can be coined as subtle and naturalistic. The subject, here was elegant scenes of court life and history. Thus, Rajasthani art can be called a fusion of Islamic idiom with indigenous art styles and of local classical traditions with elements of Persian and European Renaissance. Initially, the Persian and Turkish elements were just superimposed on Rajput painting, later the synthesis was absolute. Blending with local art tradition the elements of Mughal art, the artists migrating to regional courts from Mughal court, created several timeless masterpieces. Similarly, the revival of miniature painting in the Mughal court, under Mohammad Shah brought back many of the painters that fled from the Mughal court during the reign of his predecessors. Apparently, painters with widely varying styles were working simultaneously on this project. The craftsmanship also is not of the highest quality. The hand of the artist changes from rendering the faces, animals and of the landscape at the background which was the tradition much popular in the scriptoriums and studios of book illustration in India. The fusion of Mughal and Rajput traditions is apparent. The size of the manuscript and the distribution of the space between the text and the illustration do not look royal. It must be made for the Mughal emperor in some provincial capital as a gift as was the trend set for political diplomacy.

Talking of the provincial capitals one finds that *Shirani’s* manuscript shares several elements that are peculiar to Jodhpur school of painting. Of all the Rajput clans, Jodhpur/Marwar had the most interesting love-hate relationship with the Mughal court. Akbar’s wife Joda bai was from Jodhpur. Jaswant Singh of Marwar spent a long time, during emperor Shahjehan’s period, serving the Mughal court besides having the family ties with Mughals inevitably preferred to patronize the contemporary idiom of court painting. Later, Ajit Singh was forced to give his daughter in marriage to emperor Farrakhsyar. Ajit Singh’s son Abhay Singh, was anointed king by the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah himself. If the painting is done in some provincial capital or by Rajasthani painters, it is done at Jodhpur during this period. Profile faces with rounded foreheads, elongated eyes with edges upturned and slightly hooked noses, less studied rendering, swashing linear rhythms and intense glow of colour and flat application of colour are some of the typical Jodhpur features that are also apparent in *Shirani’s Laila Majnun*.

The other main evidence of the manuscript belonging to the Rajasthani school is that the manuscript was a part of a personal collection of Hafiz Mahmud Shirani who originally belonged to Tonk. Tonk was the princely state of Rajasthan in Western India. Today, the district is bounded on the north by Jaipur on the east by Madhpur District on the southeast by Kota district on the south by Bundi district on the west by Ajmer. The state was founded by an Afghan military man, Muhammad Amir Khan (1768-1834). Hafiz Mahmud Shirani belonged to the Afghan breed of Shirani tribe who had come to India with Sultan Mahmood Ghaznavi and had stayed back in Tonk. There is a strong possibility that he had acquired the manuscript before coming to Lahore in 1921, where he died as a teacher at Oriental College.

Conclusion

To conclude *Shirani's Laila Majnun* is not a product of some isolated phenomenon rather it possesses a unified character with the mainstream Indian culture during the 18th century. The physiognomy of the figures in the paintings is characterized by the increasing naturalism, the faces are typical of Rajput style while the iconography, the theme of the manuscript and the selection of episodes for illustration exhibit Mughal scheme of book illustration. As a matter of fact, the early Mughalized Rajput style developed here into a mature style of provincial painting during the later Mughal period where Persian, Mughal and other indigenous elements of painting appear as a compact whole. This whole combination may be called the main characteristic of provincial schools of painting which is very well demonstrated in *Shirani's Laila Majnun*.

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