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A Literary Figure or a Behavioral Reaction! A Review of “*angosht gazidan*”^{*} in Iranian Literature and Painting

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Abstract

Problem statement: Surprise, shame and guilt are considered to be human emotions. Reactions to these emotions are subject to biological and cultural issues. Looking at the Iranian art and literature in the context of history, it seems that one of the reactions of amazed and regretful people in the Iranian culture has been *angosht gazidan*, as it can be found numerously in ancient Iranian texts, ancient poetry, and painting. Since this reaction can only be seen in the cultural history of Iran, it should be attributed to the specific culture of Iranians.

Research objective: The objective of this research is to find the historical course of *angosht gazidan* in Iranian literature and painting and examine whether this reaction has been derived from the behavioral reaction of Iranians.

Research method: This research applies the descriptive-historical method by reviewing library sources and documents to study the term *angosht gazidan* in ancient Persian literature and painting. It is tried to select and study at least one literary and artistic sample related to the subject from each century. The sample will be compared to the biographies of travelers about the behavior of Iranians who visited Iran during these years in an emotional state to find out whether the gesture is a literary figure or a behavioral reaction.

Conclusion: *Angosht gazidan* is merely a literary term. It has never had any real manifestation in the Iranian society. None of the travelers who wrote about Iran and Iranian culture in the context of history have mentioned this reaction in their behavior. The poet has benefited from this metonymy for exaggeration and its beauty. This has made it inclusive throughout the Iranian literature. The association between Iranian literature and painting has led to the depiction of this gesture and its objective presentation in the painting.

Keywords: *Iranian literature, Iranian painting, Literary figure, Behavioral reaction, Angosht gazidan.*

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Introduction

Culture is effective in determining countless human issues. Cultural influences shape human thinking and behavior. To the extent that they influence behavioral responses to emotional situations that seem to be completely unconscious and uncontrollable. For example, by reflecting on the reactions that a surprised person may show – such as raising eyebrows, opening the mouth, pausing, and rounding the eyes – and the similarities in different cultures, these reactions appear to have biological roots, similar to other gestures that appear on the face of an anxious and scared person. However, it should be borne in mind that, even in these similar cases, there are primitive ethnicities that are different from others. For example, some of the Melanesians in the Independent State of Papua New Guinea consider the gestures of a fearful person as those of a threatening person (Crivelli, Russell, Jarillo & Fernández-Dols, 2016, 12403). This suggests that culture can influence the representation of reactions. However, these reactions are similar and sometimes identical, at least in a some part of human societies, to the extent that researchers who follow the biological theory think that they are inherent. Nevertheless, there are other reactions and gestures that are purely conventional and symbolic and are clearly influenced by cultures. “Therefore, some non-verbal actions may be culture-specific and different in other cultures or have different manifestations. For example, upward thumbing in Western culture is often a sign of victory, but the same concept is shown with raised pointing finger in Iranian culture” (Ghasemzadeh, Saffari & Alinaghi, 2018, 163). *Angosht gazidan* seems not to be a biological phenomenon. It is entirely subject to cultural issues specific to Iranian culture because it is only observed the cultural geography of Iran. Thus, by examining this expression in the context of Iranian history, it will be clear how long it has come into being in Iranian literature and painting and how long it has lasted. The next point to note is whether the expression was adapted from Iranians’ behavior in times of excitement or it was merely a literary figure. To answer this question, one has to find out whether this reaction

has occurred in Iranian societies in the course of history. To this end, examples of this expression will be examined in Iranian historical and literary documents such as poetry, ancient literary texts, and painting to clarify when it was formed in Iranian literature and how it appeared in Iranian painting. Referring to travelogues related to the designated historical periods in the Iranian Plateau, it will also be examined whether this expression was solely visible in literature and painting or it was recorded by the travelers as a behavioral response in the Iranian cultural context.

Research Background

In an article titled “An Analysis of the Function of Non-verbal Communications in Shahnameh” published in *Persian Language and Literature*, Ghasemzadeh, Saffari, and Alinaghi (2018) concluded that the representation of body language of *Shahnameh* characters was designed to arise reflection on the individual and social behavior patterns of Iranian and non-Iranian ethnicities in recognition of Iranian cultural identity.

It was then closer to metaphor and symbolism. In the article titled “Analysis and Decoding the Nonverbal Communication in Sadis Boostan” published in the *Bustan-e Adab* journal, Nikdarasl and Ahmadianipai (2016) concluded that Saadi was well aware of the use of non-verbal communication in the form of body language and functions of objects language – such as gifts and assets, clothing and jewelry – and paralinguistic elements – such as tone, spoken language, etc.

Being aware of their impact and linking them to the speech, Saadi has made more sense in his poetic space. To date, there has been no comprehensive research on *angosht gazidan* in Iranian painting as a merely literary figure or a behavioral reaction. The results of such research may be useful in the fields of psychology, art history, and literature.

Research Method

This study, which is a fundamental research in terms of purpose, attempts to clarify the gesture of *angosht gazidan* as a surprise reaction in the context of the

history of Iranian art and literature. The research was conducted through the descriptive-historical and correlational method. Research data on painting, psychology, literature, and art were extracted from library and documentary sources through observation and taking notes. In this regard, it has been attempted to study at least one literary and artistic piece from each century related to the subject and compare them to the travelers' accounts of the Iranians' behavior in emotional states. In this way, it could be found out whether the term was merely a literary figure or a behavioral response of Iranians to emotional situations.

***Angosht gazidan* and behavioral reactions**

In Iranian culture, the term *angosht gazidan* means “to be amazed, astonished, to sigh and regret” (Dehkhoda, 1998, 3590-3591). There are many theories about human emotions. Some have considered “anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise” to be the six main emotions in humans (Kohler, Turner, Stolar, Bilker, Brensinger, & Gur, 2004, 273). However, Izard introduces ten emotions based on his distinct emotion theory: “joy, interest-excitement, surprise, fear, sadness, anger, disgust, contempt, shame, and guilt” (Izard, 1991, 74). On this basis, we can refer to this term as the emotion of surprise, shame, and guilt in humans. During his research on emotions, Darwin (1859) concluded that emotions help animals and humans adapt to their environment (Reeve, 2010, 335) and that head movements are effective in showing the inner emotions of individuals similar to animals (Pease, 2016, 102-103). Hands are also very important in instrumental nonverbal communication and are more involved with the brain than other organs in establishing nonverbal communication and collaboration (Pease & Pease, 2008, 42). Can it be thought that *angosht gazidan* is a type of human adaptation to an emotional situation that reduces the vulnerability of an open mouth with a hand? Can it be perceived as a subconscious behavior that humans do in an involuntary way to protect themselves? “Darwin was amazed at the resemblance of emotional states of the face among various nations and argued

that emotional expression is inherent and universal” (Harris, 1995, 18). Then, if *angosht gazidan* is to be considered as an innate action, one of its prerequisites will be its universality. Looking at other societies in the context of history, it will be clear that this term does not exist in any culture other than Iran's. Some researchers believe that *angosht gazidan* is some kind of non-verbal behavior. “One of the metaphors used in the literature that is based on nonverbal behavior is *angosht gazidan* and biting the dorsal side of the hand' that shows one's regret. Sometimes *angosht gazidan* may indicate surprise” (Nikdarasl & Ahmadianipai, 2016, 188). However, it should be remembered that gestures such as raised eyebrows, open eyes and mouth at the time of surprise are also non-verbal gestures on the face (Reisenzein, Meyer & Schützwohl, 1996, 4). “Facial reactions exist in all emotions” (Franken, 2005, 410). These gestures have innate roots, but *angosht gazidan* has cultural and social roots. Can this social behavior be considered as a way of concealing the excitement so that others are not aware of the shock or its severity, or consider it a kind of polite behavior? Things like increased heart rate, hypertension, inability to understand, analyze and remember appropriate operating standards, freezing and loss of awareness are other symptoms that have psychological not social roots (Bürki-Cohen, 2010, 74).

Given this, we can call *angosht gazidan* a kind of nonverbal cue that was deliberately showed by the puzzled or regretful person. However, the same question is raised as to why such cues are not used today. To understand this, it is best to look at the historical background of the term in Iranian cultural history to determine the cultural areas in which it existed and whether it was observed in the society at the time.

***Angosht gazidan* in Iranian literature and painting**

Angosht gazidan is only visible in Iranian literature up to the Fourteenth century AD. Later, it appears in Iranian painting. Therefore, its history is divided into two parts: before and after painting.

• *Angosht gazidan* before Iranian Painting (9th to 13th centuries AD)

The earliest use of this term is to be found in Rudaki's poetry in the ninth and tenth centuries AD: Jesus saw one man killed and fallen on a path / He bit his fingers in surprise (Rudaki, 2001, 10). Some believe that this verse is Nasir Khusraw Qubadiani's (Hasheminejad, 2007, 17). If so, then this is related to the eleventh century AD. Nasir Khusraw has a valuable travelogue describing his journey from Merv to Balkh from 1046 to 1053 AD, passing through several cities of Iran at that time and representing many places and moods of the people (Qubadiani al-Marvazi, 1956, 15-16). Interestingly, Nasir Khusraw not only made no reference to this behavior among Iranians but did not also use the term in his travelogue despite using it in his poetry. He uses "surprise" verb instead of *angosht gazidan* throughout his travelogue. "And there I saw the great buildings made from rocks that shall surprise whosoever sees it" (ibid, 80). The Great Ferdowsi has also an example of this term conveying regret: One unnamed man must be chosen / to prevent biting our fingers later (Ferdowsi, 2001, 60). According to this verse, a regretful person should show a gesture like *angosht gazidan*. With a little reflection on the behavioral actions of current society, it will be clear that a person who has committed an error and is now aware of their mistake will never put their finger in their mouth as a sign of regret. Instead, they put their head down on their knees while covering their faces with their hands or bite their lips. If regret is considered to be associated with the two emotions of shame and guilt, it must be considered as a self-conscious emotion related to the 'self'. In these emotions, the pointing finger points to the self as the guilty or responsible person (Tangney & Dearing, 2002, 76). This may be the reason why in Iranian literature the index finger is directed towards the regretful person. It is bitten instead of the lips to indicate the severity of the individual's blame. Some believe that these two gestures are different. *Angosht gazidan* is an indication of regret. However, it means

surprise too. These two gestures are completely Iranian. This gesture has been repeatedly depicted in ancient Iranian paintings. However, one must distinguish between a display of surprise and regret. People bite the side of their finger as an indication of regret and remorse, while they bite their fingertip to show surprise" (Hasheminejad, 2007, 17). However, it is almost impossible to distinguish between these two terms/gestures in Iranian painting from the image and the depicted facial expressions, because the subject is painted precisely the same way in the two modes. The only way to recognize these emotions is to refer to the theme or the passages inscribed in the image. This has been repeated many times in Iranian literature. For example, take the following two excerpts from *Kashf al-asrar wa 'uddat al-abrar*, which dates back to the Twelfth Century AD: "The fingers of regret are at his mouth wondering! The service is here and [her] love is there!" (Meybodi, 1992, 710). In this example, we can detect astonishment and regret at the same time, indicating that the two states are sometimes very close to each other in Iranian literature. Other examples of *angosht gazidan* as an indication of regret can be sought in the Twelfth-century *Kelile o Demne*: "When the lion finished the cow, she was very regretful at the haste and bit her fingers in regret" (Monshi, 2010, 97). Iranian literature in the Thirteenth century AD has also benefited greatly from this term: "All the angels wondered in surprise while biting their fingers..." (Razi, 2001, 70). "The shepherd returned back from the plain and told of the plenty of the milk of the sheep while the hearers were astonished with their finger in their mouth" (Varavini, 1990, 50). A Thirteenth-century travelogue about Iran is Marco Polo's. Although this travelogue does not provide a detailed account of the people's behavior and is more about geography and the routes of movement (Polo, 1992, 15-17), there is no mention of this behavior among Iranian people.

After appearing in Iranian painting (14th century AD)

The term continues to be used in the Fourteenth

century AD. An example of the term that connotes regret is to be seen in the following line by Hafez: how long can I sit for the smell of a friend In this darkness / Sometimes fingers on the mouth sometimes head on the knees (Hafez, 2000, 758). In this line, Hafez takes the two movements as a sign of remorse, reinforcing the doubt that *angosht gazidan* may be a kind of behavioral response. Another example of the term used in the sense of wonder can be found in Salman Savoji's poetry: As the wavy gem saw the palm of your hand / you bit your fingers in astonishment (Savoji, 1992, 600). An illustration of this term can be seen in Iranian-Islamic painting in this century. For example, one should note a copy of the *Kitāb al-Hayawān* by Al-Jahiz in 1300 AD, dating back to the late Ilkhanid period (Fig. 1).

The painting depicts a woman complaining to two friends while her friends listen to her amazed and impressed. The surprise is indicated by one's open hand and the other's *angosht gazidan* (Akasheh, 2001, 354-355). As pointed out by Akasheh, the gesture is one of the ways to express one's surprise in painting because, in traditional Iranian painting, there is no significant difference between individual faces and it is difficult to distinguish facial expressions. It should be noted, however, that the expression of emotional states of the face can be observed in some versions of these paintings. An example is the *Demotte Shahnameh* or *Great Ilkhanid Shahnama* (Pakbaz, 2005, 62). This *Shahnameh* was written in 1328 AD (Blair & Bloom, 2002, 62). Although some examples of facial emotions can be found in this *Shahnameh*, the artist has used *angosht gazidan* representation in their painting for emphasis. For this purpose, we should refer to the portrait of Ardeshir and his wife (Fig. 2).

Ardeshir's wife, Ardavan's daughter, poured venom in Ardeshir's cup while being provoked by her brother. The cup fell from Ardeshir's hands and broke before drinking (Rastegar Fassaei, 2000, Vol. 1, 43). The artist has drawn this very moment. In the *Kar-Namag i Ardashir i Pabagan* (*Book of the Deeds of Ardeshir*), it is stated that "Ardeshir and



Fig. 1. Excerpt from a woman painting complaining about her husband, Jahez's *al-Hayawān*, Ambrosiana Library, Milan. Source: Akasheh, 2001, 357.

Zank both became astonished when they saw the event" (Anonymous, 1975, 93-95). As mentioned in the book, Ardeshir and his wife was surprised to find that the cup was broken. In addition to drawing the emotional states of two characters, the artist has also used the fingers to express these states. It seems that with the visual exemplification of the term in the painting, this behavioral gesture must have been made in the society of the day in order for the artist to depict it. However, with reference to *Ibn Battuta's travelogue*, which belongs to this century, it becomes clear that this reaction was not a special gesture of Iranians, because it has not been mentioned even once in his travelogue. Interestingly, Ibn Battuta uses "*ajab*" (surprise) to express the audiences' surprise, a noun that has its roots in Arabic. For example, the story of Sheikh Heidari's assassination in this work is as follows: "When the hangman's sword fell upon him and did not work on him, the people were surprised" (Ibn Battuta, 1997, Vol. 2, 112). It is stated in the original text that "And the wonder of the people..." (Ibn Battuta, 1987, Vol. 3, 192). An example of this term in the fifteenth century AD is to be found in *Kherad Name-ye-Eskandari* (*Alexander's Book of Wisdom*), where the Chinese Ruler sent a humble gift to Alexander and "When Alexander saw those gifts / He bit his fingers in astonishment" (Jami, 2007, 972). Examples of this term in the Sixteenth century AD can be found in the verses of Mohtasham Kashani: Mohtasham! Now he is excited about my doings / I bite my fingers in regret of what I did (Mohtasham, 2008, 587). Another example of this

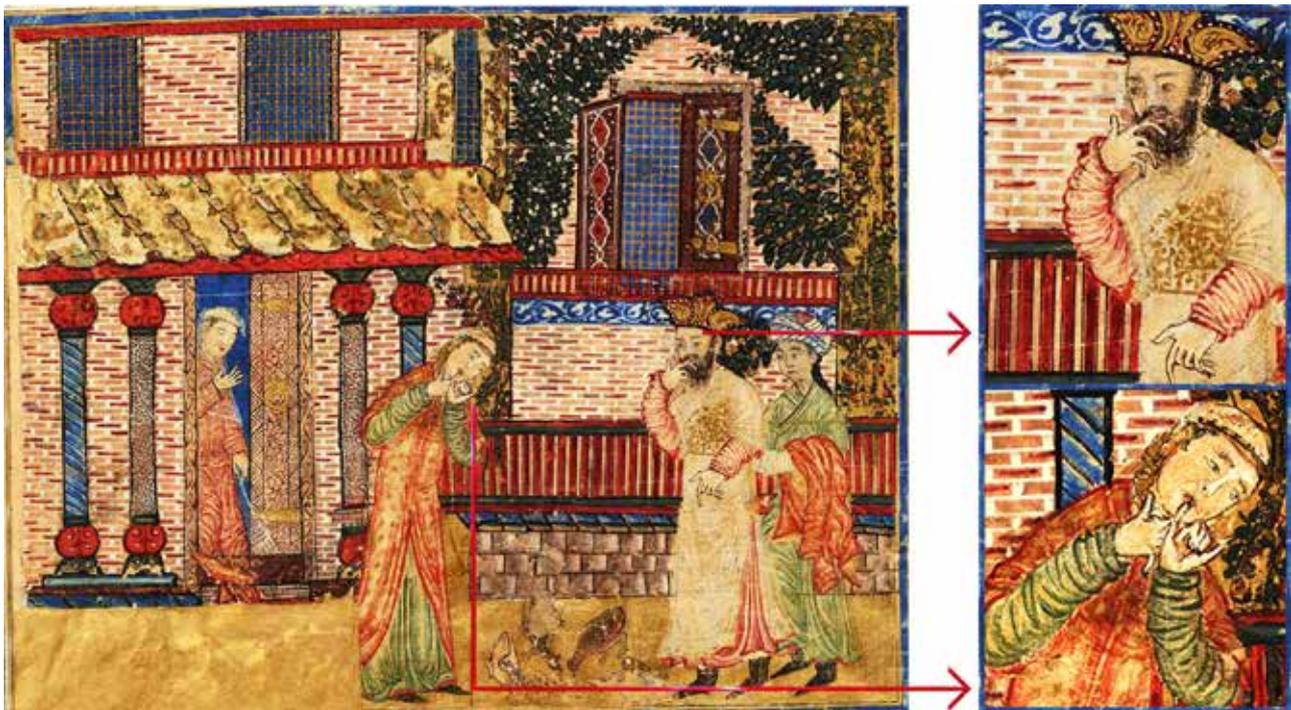


Fig. 2. Ardashir and his wife, Demotte Shahnameh. Source: Pope, 1999, 393.

term can be found in the paintings of the *Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp*. Bahram Gor strikes two zebras with an arrow and the soldiers are amazed at this performance. This *Shahnameh* dates back to about 1525-1535 AD (Grabar, 2011, 98-99). At the top of the painting, one has bit his fingers in surprise (Fig. 3).

Despite the use of this term/gesture in literature and painting in the fifteenth and Sixteenth centuries AD, this behavioral response has not been documented by any of the travelers who have traveled to Iran during those years. Visitors such as Giosafat Barbaro, Ambrogio Contarini, Catering Zeno, Giovanni Maria Angiolello, and Vincentio D'alessandri who came to Iran during the reign of Uzun Hasan, one of the most powerful rulers of the Aq Qoyunlu dynasty, and Shah Tahmasp, the second ruler of Safavid dynasty, and have written about geographical areas, temperament, behavior, and customs of Iranians, especially courtiers, (Barbaro, Contarini, Zeno, Angiolello & D'alessandri, 1970, 9-10), have never recorded such a behavioral action. For example, somewhere is written that "It made the great crowd look upon them with astonishment" (ibid, 57).

"Steel ax cuts the finger of regret / It is a pity that

one skillful Farhad did not remain this world" (Saib Tabrizi, 1986, Vol. 3, 1212). Another example of the use of this term is in seventeenth-century poetry: "I had a vain illusion beyond the veils of fantasy / at the time of my last breath I remained with a finger on astonished lips" (Bidel Dehlavi, 2008, Vol. 2, 608). Another instance written/drawn in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century is the painting of Sohrab's death at the hands of Rostam. Mo'en Mosavver's work is another example of *angosht gazidan* in the paintings of the Safavid period and the Isfahan school, which shows a sense of regret (Fig. 4). This work was done in 1649 AD. "Despite Sohrab's scar, there is no sign of pain in his face. Only the inflamed clouds, the black horse's impatience, and the bitten fingers of the crew tell the depth of the catastrophe" (Canby, 2003, 111-112). Looking at the work of explorers/travelers in these centuries will make it clear that no one has mentioned such a reaction among Iranians. One example is *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle* (Pietro Della Valle's voyage to Iran) which began in 1617 AD and lasted for six years, and coincided with the reign of Shah Abbas the Great. His travelogue contains important

information about Iran and the mood of the people of the Safavid era because he has played an important role in recording the details of Iranian behavior (Della Valle, 2001, 12). However, he does not point to a specific behavior/gesture in Iranians that is related to surprise. “When I answered them that our old men were sixty, seventy years old, some of them were very surprised” (ibid, 650). Between 1632 and 1668 AD Tavernier made six trips to the East during which he visited Iran more than nine times. His first trip was during the reign of King Safi, the younger grandson and direct successor of King Abbas the Great. His other trips were made during the reign of King Abbas II and King Solomon (Tavernier, 1990, V-Z). Although he became deeply familiar with the Safavid Iranian society and its habits, customs, thoughts, and opinions, the ethics and behavior of various classes and showed them in his travelogue (ibid, D-H), he made no reference to *angosht gazidan* at the time of surprise among Iranians. “The poor gardener bought the cow and after three days the animal died and made its owner surprised and a pitiful” (ibid, 615).

The term is also used in the nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, examples of which are: “A valiant who at the day of the Angel of Death’s grudge / has his fingers at his mouth in bewilderment” (Qaani, 2008, 176). “When he lighted the cigarette and poked / Rostam bit his fingers in astonishment (Bahar, 2008, 383). An example of this term in this century in the form of lithography is to be found in a version of Nizami’s *Quinary (Panj Ganjor Khamsa)*, which illustrates a continuation of the tradition of painting in expressing moods and behaviors (Fig. 5). The work dates back to 1895 AD. With his large army, Dhul-Qarnayn passed in the vicinity of the Gog and Magog tribe and observed them. Hence, a display of surprise mingled with thinking *angosht gazidan* by Dhul-Qarnayn and his companions emphasizes this (Lal Shateri & Nazemianfard, 2016, 108). Specific Iranian gestures, such as *angosht gazidan* to display amazement and wonder are common patterns in paintings/lithographs (Aghapour, 2002, 202). There

are many examples of the use of this gesture in Iranian painting since the Fourteenth Century. This is rooted in the profound impact of Iranian literature



Fig. 3. Hunting of two zebras with one arrow by Bahram Gor, Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp. Source: Ferdowsi, 2011, 177.



Fig. 4. Rostam and Sohrab, from Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, Mo’ en Mosavver, Isfahan. Source: Canby, 2003, 111.

on Iranian painting, because “literature and painting have been linked together from the early times; writing has initially used drawing as a tool, that is why in the Persian language the word “*negashtan*/writing” has long been used in the sense of writing and still continues to be used” (Alboghbish & Ashtiani Araghi, 2018, 32). Like many other literary influences, which differed in different eras such as the Qajar period, the beauty spot, tress, ringlets, etc in the paintings were taken from literature (Alimohammadi Ardakani, 2013, 143). Here, too, the artist has used this literary term to express emotional states in Iranian painting.

Discussion

According to what has been said, we can argue that *angosht gazidan* is one of the reactions that Iranian artists and poets have used throughout history to illustrate the reaction of people in emotional situations such as surprise or remorse. This term began to be used in literature from the ninth century AD and in Iranian painting from the Fourteenth century AD. Since the invention of the term in literature and art, its use continued throughout the centuries. The

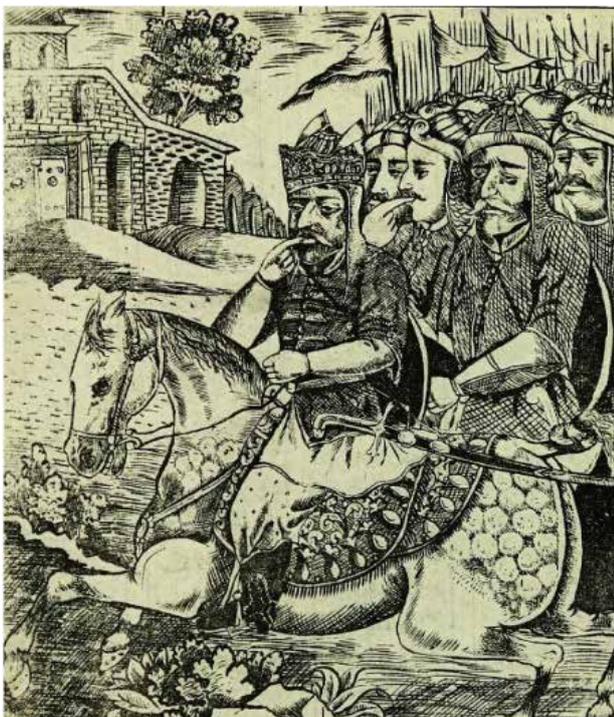


Fig. 5. Dhul-Qarnayn (Alexander) observing the strange Gog and Magog, Nizami's Quinary . Source: Lal Shateri & Nazemianfard, 2016, 113.

widespread use of this metaphor in Iranian cultural history has led some scholars such as Hashminejad (2007) to mistakenly believe that this literary term was a behavioral reaction in emotional situations among Iranians that was likely lost due to change over time. Examining this term/gesture in the context of the history of Iranian literature and painting, it became clear that the use of this literary figure has been going on for almost a thousand years and has never been removed from Iranian literature. The association of Iranian literature with painting gave this imaginary gesture an objective manifestation that has continued up to now in traditional Iranian painting. This makes it clear that the term is merely a literary figure not indicated by Iranians' behavior, because travelers visiting Iran in the context of history have not referred to such behavior in the Iranian people and have not even used it as a literary figure. It is because this literary term is specific to the Iranian language and culture. Examples of these terms are also found today in the street literature: “Spit drying in someone's mouth: surprised (from excess surprise or admiration), confused” (Ketabi, 2004, 179).

Needless to say that an exaggeration has been made to show the intensity of the action because one's mouth will not left open in wonder until it is dry! More exaggerated examples are: Jaw-dropping from the intensity of surprise, grow horns from surprise. This Doesn't happen in reality. According to Table 1, the term has existed in Persian poetry and prose since the ninth century AD. It appeared in painting in the Fourteenth century AD. As there has been no reference to the term/gesture in travelogues, it is merely a literary term.

Conclusion

Angosht gazidan should be regarded as a literary term in Iranian cultural history that conveys a sense of surprise and remorse. However, some closely related terms *Angosht be/dar/bar dahan/dahan/dandan/lab avardan/dashtan/gereftan/khaeedan* (have/put/bring finger to/in/on mouth/tooth/lip) exist that

have different meanings such as humility, regret, thoughtfulness, respect, fear, silence, etc. *Angosht gazidan* is widely used in Iranian art and literature. It is considered as a part of Iranian culture. It has been presented in Iranian cultural history since the earliest centuries of Persian poetry and literature. Its visual representation is evident in Iranian painting from the Fourteenth century AD. However, the use of the term is not derived from Iranian behavior: it is merely a literary figure that conveys either a surprise or pity. The related gesture has not existed in daily life of people, as no traveler/explorer in the context of Iranian cultural history refers to this behavioral reaction among Iranians. The poets/writers have used this metaphor for aesthetic purposes and made it common among authors. The term became so popular that was used in Iranian cultural history for centuries and still continues to be used. Since Iranian painting is heavily influenced by Persian literature, the term can be seen in Iranian painting as well, though it took centuries for painters to visualize this gesture in the mind of the poets/authors on the canvas. Altogether, this term is a literary figure not derived from the behavior of individuals. The way the term was embodied in Iranian history, both visually and literally, has been the same throughout the centuries without any change. The tip of the forefinger is placed in the mouth between the teeth and bitten, conveying a sense of regret or surprise.

Endnote

* *Angosht gazidan* is a literary term in Iranian literature that expresses the meanings of surprise, wonder, remorse and regret. In this term, the person bites his finger while gazing at the event that has caught his attention. This term is a specific term in Iranian culture and language and has no translation in English language, so this article uses the *angosht gazidan* without any translation.

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