

Persian translation of this paper entitled:
نگاهی به شگردهای آشنزادایی در آثار محمد سیاه قلم
is also published in this issue of journal.

Original Research Article

A Look at the Defamiliarization Devices in the Works of Muhammad Siyah Qalam

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Received: 28/06/2020 ;

accepted: 01/11/2020;

available online: 21/04/2021

Abstract

Problem statement: Defamiliarization, as a concept, defines art as the depiction of things in a new, unexpected light. As a brief review reveals, the works of Muhammad Siyah Qalam are distinguished from the mainstream Persian miniature - which followed specific criteria, due to characteristics that create a certain kind of defamiliarization. Therefore, the essential question for this research is, “what are the unconventional devices used by Siyah Qalam to achieve defamiliarization?”

Research objective: This research explores the defamiliarization devices used by Siyah Qalam. Theoretical analysis of art from a defamiliarization standpoint is important because it reveals the artist’s mechanisms and devices to accomplish the aesthetical goal of prolonging perception.

Research method: This study is conducted as secondary, descriptive-analytical research and provides visual examples to aid understanding.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that Siyah Qalam transcended Persian miniature conventions using unique subject matters, new combinations, personification, exaggeration, repetition, and unconventional painting techniques. His particular use of these devices enables defamiliarization to be explored in his works on both the non-structural and structural levels.

Keywords: *Defamiliarization, Persian Miniature, Muhammad Siyah Qalam, Viktor Shklovsky.*

Introduction

“Muhammad Siyah Qalam” (also spelled “Mehmed Siyah Kalem”) was a Timurid court painter in Herat, whose real identity is a matter of dispute among art scholars. According to some sources, he was the same person as “Giyath al-Din” the Painter - who was sent to China by “Baysunghur”, son of

Shahrokh - while according to others, he and “Haji Muhammad Heravi” the Painter were the same person. Despite his rather vague identity, he can be described as an artist who rose above Persian miniature rules and conventions, creating distinct works of art. A brief review of Siyah Qalam’s works finds a defamiliarization approach that sets them apart from other works of Persian miniature. Defamiliarization is among the concepts used in

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literary and art criticism, and defines art as the ability to defamiliarize things - that is, to see things in a new light when life has become but a routine. The term was first used by Viktor Shklovsky, who viewed communication of senses, as they are perceived, as an objective of art. It should be noted that defamiliarization is relative, and this relativity also applies to the works of Siyah Qalam and the devices he used. For example, some of his devices may have also been frequently employed by other artists, but it is his use of them in the context of Persian miniature - with its cohesive criteria and rules - that makes them interesting. This research sought to explore defamiliarization in the works of Siyah Qalam and answer the essential question, "what devices did Siyah Qalam use to achieve defamiliarization?" As a comparison between his works and works of others reveal, Siyah Qalam used defamiliarization on both the non-structural and structural levels, transcending the rules of Persian miniature. This research explored Siyah Qalam's use of defamiliarization devices, which distinguished his works from the rest of Persian miniature. Analysis from perspectives such as defamiliarization reveals new things about a given work of art and leads to a deeper understanding of it.

Literature review

Most books on Persian miniature dedicate a section to the art and life of "Muhammad Siyah Qalam". "Persian Miniature: A Research on the History of Persian Painting and Miniature" by Yaghoob Azhand (2013) is an example, while another book by the same author, "Master Muhammad Siyah Qalam" (Azhand, 2007a), deals exclusively with the life and works of the painter. Among his studies is the article "Muhammad Siyah Qalam and Ghiyath al-Din the Painter" in which he speculates that Siyah Qalam was the same person as "Ghiyath al-Din", who was sent to China by the court of "Shahrokh" (Azhand, 2006). Also, in the article "Ink drawing technique in Persian miniature" he provides a general review of the style and discusses its use in different artworks (Azhand, 2007b). In his article

"The unsolvable mystery of master Muhammad Siyah Qalam", Hosseini (2005) takes a look at the life of the artist and analyzes some of his works. The article "The semantic function of explicit and implicit signifiers in the works of Muhammad Siyah Qalam: a case study" by Dadvar and Kheyri (2013), reviews his works with a semiotic approach while taking into account variables such as explicit and implicit signifiers, social and cultural factors, and rituals and myths. Most of the relevant studies have only introduced Siyah Qalam and his works, and none was found to have the exact same approach to his art as the current research.

Research method

The data for this study was gathered exclusively from the literature and is organized into a descriptive and analytical research.

Theoretical basis

The term "defamiliarization" was first coined by Viktor Shklovsky in 1919 in his essay "Art as Device" (Makaryk, 2015, 13). He argued that the power of art lies in the defamiliarization of things and representing them in an unexpected light. In other words, the main function of art is to defamiliarize - to reorganize our perceptions into a new structure. According to Shklovsky, a great deal of human life is spent routinely, and the main purpose of art is to break any form of routine. Art makes everything unfamiliar and vague and hinders perception. In fact, art creates a new reality and prolongs the act of perception (Alavi Moghaddam, 2002, 105). Shklovsky maintained that art provides unfamiliar, unexpected ways to see, giving us the ability to see things as if for the first time (Harland, 2015, 241). The goal of art is not to create a sense of seeing and to merely understand things; in a way, art makes perception complicated because perception, in art, is an end in itself and must be prolonged. What is created is not important in art (Shklovsky, 2015, 162).

We tend to gradually grow accustomed to everything. For example, people living by the beach are deaf

to the sound of the waves. In other words, things become monotonous over time and lose their charm. Meanwhile, things are new and unconventional in a work of art, insofar as, for example, a common word feels new when read in a poem. One can argue that poetic expression defamiliarizes words and other linguistic elements (Ahmadi, 2011, 308). Poetry is a way of thinking, or more accurately, a way of thinking through imagination, which requires a special mental effort that makes the process seem relatively easier (Shklovsky, 1991, 2). Monotonous life wears down our sensitivity, and that may be the reason why most of us are discontented with the monotony of our lives (De Botton & Armstrong, 2017, 73). On the other hand, questioning things breaks the monotony and creates a new outlook that leads to new ideas (Amo'yan, 2017, 36). What makes someone a poet is the ability to transform the function of language. As a matter of fact, the trick of art is that it defamiliarizes and rather inhibits perception. In art, what matters is expression rather than subject.

In literature, there are devices to defamiliarize language for poetic effect. These devices create a deeper, more pure perception for the reader. Defamiliarization is a concept used in literary and art criticism. Although the devices discussed next are mostly used in poetry and literature, they can sometimes also be found in visual arts, creating a kind of defamiliarization. Given the broad diversity of defamiliarization devices and that discussing all of them would be irrelevant to this research, only the ones considered in the analysis of Siyah Qalam's works will be reviewed.

One of the devices to defamiliarize language is creating new combinations. In his book "The Music of Poetry", Shafiei Kadkani mentions that blending is a way to make the language appear unique. The reader is familiar with or, as Russian formalists put it, has grown accustomed to the building blocks of a combination. Still, combinations are capable of surprising the reader and defamiliarize, which leads to the discovery of the truth of things (Shafiei Kadkani, 2009, 28). There are many examples in visual arts, where artists have

created new combinations. Later in the article, we will see how Siyah Qalam created new combinations that did not follow the rules of Persian miniature. Personification is a literary device where human traits or behavior is attributed to animals or objects (Alavi Moghaddam, 2002, 108). While personification is originally a literary device, human traits are occasionally attributed to objects in visual arts. Another device for defamiliarization is exaggeration, which seems to be one of the most common devices used by a great many artists. Exaggeration is valued because it is one of the best ways to represent emotions. The Persian Dictionary "Farhang-e Bozorg-e Sokhan" (Sokhan's Grand Dictionary) defines literary exaggeration as "illustration by attributing behaviors and qualities to someone or something in a way that seems logical but has no or only rare real-life instances" (Anvari, 2002). Repetition is a visual quality used by countless artists throughout history. However, it is not exclusive to the visual arts; as Iranian author Vahidian Kamyar (2000) mentions in his book "Badi", repetition is an aesthetical device used in poetry to create a musical quality. The human mind always looks for relationships and unity between phenomena and takes pleasure in this search.

Criteria of Persian miniature

Generally speaking, Islamic art did not seek to capture things as static images; therefore, it rejected realism (Kuhnel, 2015, 19). In Persian miniature, humans and objects are drawn in a way that prophesies a new life and somewhat demonstrates transcending the outer self into the inner self (Khatami, 2011, 225). Persian miniaturists always based their art on a series of certain criteria and rules,¹ including size and subject matter. According to the book "Evolution and Faces of Persian Painting", Persian miniaturists always rejected shading and never made an effort to depict form and space. In Persian miniature, nature is always in the background and human figures are treated as decorative elements. It is also worth noting that Persian miniaturists sought to tell stories (Pope, 1999, 170-78). Other than in the periods of Western influence, no naturalism can be found in Persian painting, while techniques such as stylization,

symbolism, and decoration were always common in Iran (Pakbaz, 2011, 9). In his book “La Peinture Persane: Une Introduction”, Oleg Grabar regards history, religion, animals (for example, in “Kalila wa Dimna”), epic, romantic love, and ornamentation to be the main themes of Persian miniature (Grabar & Blair, 2011, 116-130). There have been, however, Persian painters that did not strictly follow the rules of Persian miniature and created works that were distinct from those of their contemporaries. “Muhammad Siyah Qalam” was one of them. A review of his works reveals that they do not bear many Persian miniature characteristics, and this may be the reason why his art is considered unmatched.

Muhammad Siyah Qalam

Muhammad Siyah Qalam was a Timurid court painter in Herat. The Timurid-era decorative art encompassed a variety of media and techniques, the most prominent of which being manuscript illumination (Blair & Bloom, 2015, 137). In that period, Herat saw the domination of poetry over miniature—that is, poetic language manifested in Persian painting (Hatam, 2018, 48). There are different and sometimes contradictory accounts about Siyah Qalam’s identity. According to the book “Master Muhammad Siyah Qalam”, he is believed by some to be the same person as Haji Muhammad Heravi. Muhammad Heravi was a painter who worked in the court of “Sultan Husayn Bayqara”²² and the library of “Amir Ali-Shir Nava’i”²³, showed an eccentric behavior, drew strange pictures, and even dabbled in crafts such as watchmaking and porcelain production. On the other hand, a number of art scholars speculate that he was the same person as Ghiyath al-Din the Painter, who was sent to China by “Baysunghur Mirza”²⁴, son of “Shahrokh”²⁵, and wrote a travel memoir (Azhand, 2007a, 8-70). In his book “The Lives & Arts of Old Painters of Iran”, Karimzadeh Tabrizi introduces him this way: “Mawlānā Haji Muhammad was the all-around painter of his day, who channeled his wisdom through his brush and adorned many a page with strange scenes and figures. He was an expert in illustration and illumination and dabbled

in firing Chinese porcelain too for some time. After much experimentation and countless painstaking attempts, the crockery he produced perfectly matched china in quality but did not have the exact same look and feel. Among his inventions was a clock case, which he designed in the library of Ali-Shir Nava’i and housed a figurine with a stick in hand. At the turn of every hour, the figurine would mark that hour by the number of times it banged his stick on a naqqara placed in front of him. Haji Muhammad also worked as a librarian for Ali-Shir. However, he eventually grew upset with the Turkic poet, and when Herat came under siege by Badi’ al-Zaman Mirza, he escaped and joined the prince and later died holding that same position. In early winter, the early days of the conquest, Abul-Fath Sheybani Khan died” (Karimzadeh Tabrizi, 1984, 144).

The works of Siyah Qalam, in the form of three *muraqqas*, are kept in Istanbul’s Topkapı Palace and can be divided into two categories: those with religious themes and those depicting life of desert dwellers. His religious themes are more in line with shamanism and completely free of monotheistic influences. His main characters are demons, depicted as vagabond monsters. Despite their horns, tails, disgusting skins, hideous faces, and other creaturely traits, his demons resemble humans in many ways (Azhand, 2013, 336). Due to their unique features, the defamiliarization in Siyah Qalam’s art can be explored on both the non-structural and structural levels.

Defamiliarization on the non-structural level

There are many factors besides form that determine the value of a work of art and, in a way, reflect the ideas that the artist wants to emphasize. In Persian miniature, where painters always follow certain conventions, the works of “Muhammad Siyah Qalam” stand out for features that display a defamiliarization approach also on a non-formal level. The features include subject matter, new combinations, and personification, which will be discussed in this section.

Subject matter: The life of desert dwellers is the theme of most of Siyah Qalam’s works. He also portrayed

demons and other strange characters, which were rather unprecedented in Persian miniature⁶ (Fig. 1). Scenes of violence and horror are repulsive to look at, so if painting such scenes is ever considered of value, it is not because seeing their representation is pleasant (Gaut & Lopes, 2010, 369). Siyah Qalam's themes suggest a disregard for beautiful, soothing images. According to the book "Persian Miniature: A Research on the History of Persian Painting and Miniature", his works feature shapes dispersed around the page as if separate images are taken from different memories. Nature rarely makes an appearance in his works and when it does, it is depicted in a selective, typical fashion (Azhand, 2013, 334). With respect to Siyah Qalam's works, Grabar raises questions such as, "are these images satirical representations of the world of Central Asian desert dwellers, with its shamans, mages, and travelers from faraway lands? Or do they represent the demonic side of the classical, magnificent Timurid world? Or are they just fictional scenes, in the vein of "Hieronymus Bosch" or "Francisco Goya", that powerfully portray the hidden face of the society?" (Grabar & Blair, 2011, 55). Karimzadeh Tabrizi argues that Siyah Qalam satirized the society of his day through his art (Karimzadeh Tabrizi, 2013, 55). Some of his works also depict ordinary people and everyday life. Although he was not the first Persian miniaturist to pay attention to the common man, this series of his works stands out thematically from the rest of Persian miniature⁷. For the most part, Persian miniature has been associated with literature, portraying themes from the likes of "Shahnameh" and "Khamsa of Nizami" (Fig. 2).

- New combinations: Creating new combinations is a method of defamiliarization. The viewer already knows each part of a combination - he has grown accustomed to them - but it is when they are arranged into a new combination that defamiliarization can occur. New combinations in the works of Siyah Qalam can be divided into two categories: blending visual traditions of various nations, and arrangements of body parts. The book Master "Muhammad Siyah Qalam" mentions a team of envoys sent to China by "Shahrokh". The

report of their journey reads: "The team arrived in the city of Qumul [Hami] on August 22, 1419. There, Emir Fakhr al-Din had built a grand mosque, near which the heathens [Buddhists] had a temple. All around that temple, they had erected small and big idols in a novel fashion, and over the temple door was an image



Fig. 1. Muhammad Siyah Qalam, Herat. Source: Azhand, 2013, 353.

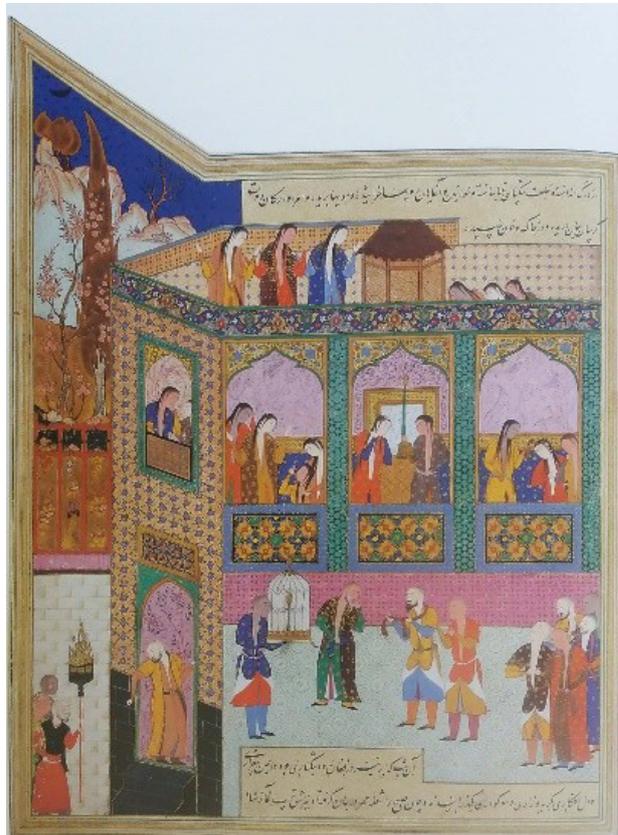


Fig. 2. Kamal ud-Din Behzad, Herat. Source: *Shahkar-ha-ye Negargari-ye Iran*, 2010, 89.

of two demons fighting” (Azhand, 2007, 51). Demons, depicted in a variety of forms, are frequent in the works of Siyah Qalam. Art scholars are polarized over the identity of Siyah Qalam’s characters as well as the dates of his works; some believe that the characters are Crimean or Volga Kipchaks, while others describe them as wandering dervishes or inspired by those of Chinese court painters. Although there is no consensus on these attributions, everyone agrees that the paintings are made by a single Muslim artist (*ibid.*). Also, despite their similarity to Chinese painting, the pieces are not Chinese. For instance, while rare in Persian miniature, the depiction of teeth is common in Siyah Qalam’s works, which may have been borrowed from Chinese painting (O. Kane, 2003, 5). Due to his ambiguous identity, Siyah Qalam’s works are sometimes considered to have Chinese origins and sometimes as portrays of Central Asian tribal and nomadic life and of shamanic rituals (Fig. 3).

Siyah Qalam’s demons are depicted dancing and playing instruments, abducting humans and horses, or sacrificing a horse. They are even dressed in human attire and wearing necklaces, bangles and anklets of gold. They have strong, layered muscles, and sometimes resemble Gothic fictional animals. It is possible that they embody the evil forces that some idolatrous cults associated with the mysterious forces of nature. Some of them may even be masked shamans impersonating demons (Azhand, 2013, 333). Despite portraying vagrant black people, some of Siyah Qalam’s pieces feature Chinese elements - yet they do not display Chinese influences in terms of visual style (Azhand, 1998). While art scholars are confused about the identity of the figures in Siyah Qalam’s works, they are certain that he did not blend only the visual traditions of a few countries. His figures are mostly blends of the animal and human forms; while possessing physical animal features such as tails and horns, they resemble humans in many ways (Fig. 4).

- Personification: As mentioned before, personification is a literary device that attributes human traits to other living and non-living things. This can be seen in some of Siyah Qalam’s pieces, where things such as

rocks and shrubs display human features (Fig. 5). The book “Persian Miniature: A Research on the History of Persian Painting and Miniature” describes one of his works this way: “A mighty tree, with intertwined, naked branches, is emerging through rocks and

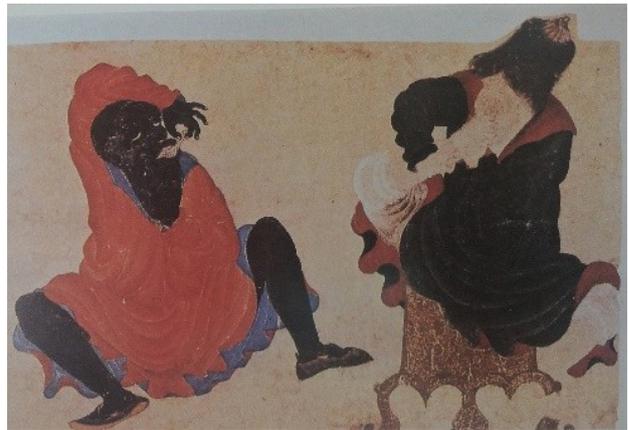


Fig. 3. Muhammad Siyah Qalam, Herat. Source: Grabar, 2011, 144.



Fig. 4. Muhammad Siyah Qalam, Herat. Source: Grabar, 2011, 149.



Fig. 5. Muhammad Siyah Qalam, Herat. Source: Azhand, 2013, 356.

stretching towards the horizon. Around its trunk wraps a dragon - as tough and stately as the tree itself - charging at two bears taking refuge on the uppermost branches. The rocks and stones, with humanlike faces, watch in terror. In the background, flowers and plants are emerging through the rocks. Moths fly through the naked branches. Here, the wild nature and a wild animal intertwine, creating a surreal scene—the kind of which can be seen in another Siyah Qalam ink drawing, where Simurgh and two dragons clash amongst leafy, blossoming trees. In this other piece, rocks have taken the shape of animals and seem to be furiously charging at one of the dragons. Fear has compelled the birds to protect themselves. The shrubs also resemble animals” (Azhand, 2013, 328).

This is not the first time in Persian miniature that rocks take the shape of humans and animals, but the significance of Siyah Qalam’s piece lies in the fact that it depicts rocks with not only physical human appearances but also human emotions such as anger or fear.⁸

Defamiliarization on the structural level

- Exaggeration: In Persian miniature, the human figure is stylized, denied status, and treated merely as a part of the composition. It is drawn as flat shapes and reduced to a decorative element. Human faces in Persian miniatures always reflect the Middle Eastern perception of the ideal beauty: light skins, rather elliptical faces, almond-shaped eyes, and small mouths (Poliakova & Rakhimova, 2002, 19). An instance of exaggeration in the works of Siyah Qalam is the tortuous limbs and bodies of his figures. In contrast to the weightless figures of Persian miniature, the bodies in his works are sturdy and heavy. His figures have their feet set to the ground with all their might. Their power seem to stem from their weight. Siyah Qalam drew his characters with twisted, crab-like legs to demonstrate their strength. These qualities show his tendency to exaggerate, which causes defamiliarization by setting his figures apart from those common in miniature (Fig. 6). The non-realistic style of figures in Persian miniature is the result of many factors and should not be attributed to a possible lack of skill in the artists. Persian

miniaturists were required to follow specific rules for drawing figures, rules which remained unchanged throughout different periods (Fig. 7). It was only after Western art rose in popularity that those traditional rules faded away and realism emerged over time. In conclusion, Siyah Qalam’s figures are exaggerated and bear no resemblance to those found in Persian miniature. - Repetition: Line and color are two visual elements essential to Persian miniature, where things are depicted using solid colors and outlines. The use of



Fig. 6. Muhammad Siyah Qalam, Herat. Source: Grabar, 2011, 141.

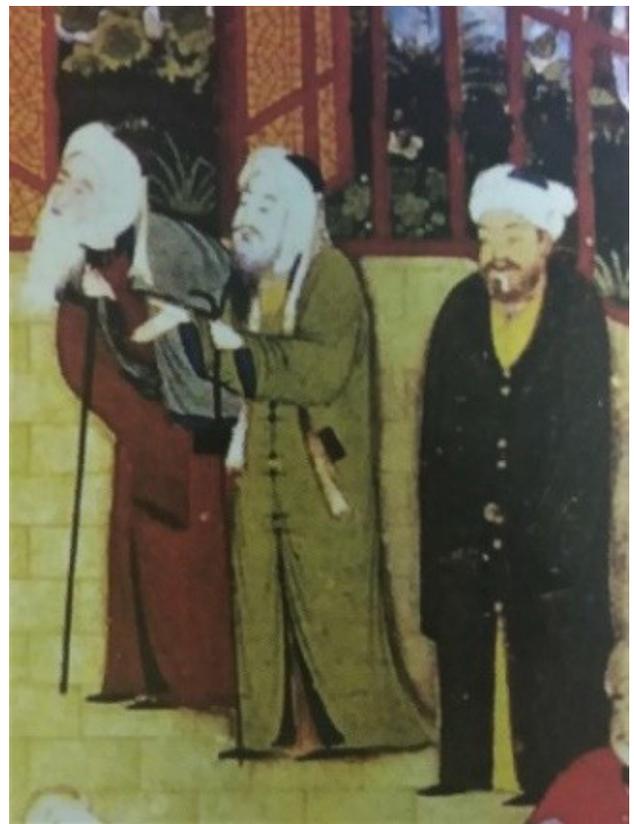


Fig. 7. (Detail) Kamal ud-Din Behzad, Herat. Source: Azhand, 2013, 314.

solid colors and the disuse of shading and other factors, shape the Persian miniature aesthetics. However, “Muhammad Siyah Qalam” managed to create a sense of form using line - albeit also using shading here and there. It seems that line was one of his key visual elements. According to “Persian Miniature: A Research on the History of Persian Painting and Miniature”, he used shading only to enhance the effect of his lines rather than as a standalone tool to create form. He used pointillism for skin and clothing textures, and a variety of rhythmic, parallel lines for cloth wrinkles and folds (Azhand, 2013, 334) (Fig. 8). It is important how the line is used in a drawing. A line may be used to portray nature, express the artist’s imaginations, or even for abstract experimentations (Halimi, 2007, 72). Moreover, the use of elements such as dots, lines and even transparent spots is one of the most effective ways to create texture in painting; they are basic, irregular elements found in nature (Friend, 2006, 152). Siyah Qalam’s use of line created a kind of repetition, which defamiliarizes, given the Persian miniature standard of using solid colors.

- Technique: “Muhammad Siyah Qalam”’s technique was ink drawing. The Persian dictionary “Farhang-e Anandraj” (Anandraj Dictionary) attributes a Western origin to ink drawing and defines it as an uncolored picture drawn in ink on a light beige or white background (Shad, 1957, 387). The outline ink drawing technique became popular in Iran from the 14th century parallel with manuscript illustration techniques. In this technique, main lines are drawn with brushes and reed pens on a blank paper, and sometimes hints of watercolor reds, blues, greens, or golds are also added selectively. Ahmad Musa⁹ and his student Amir Dolatyar¹⁰ is regarded as the preeminent artists of this technique (Pakbaz, 2015). According to the book “The Twelve Faces”, Siyah Qalam’s version of ink drawing is muddy and unrestrained, which makes his works look nothing like the ones seen in the Divan of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir (Azhand, 1998). Persian miniature is revered for its use of vivid colors. Persian miniaturists created a broad range of vivid colors from only a limited set

of primary colors (Canby, 2012, 20). Although the ink drawing technique entered Persian miniature long before Siyah Qalam, one can argue that his version of the technique is in contrast to that of other miniaturists and this creates a kind of defamiliarization (Table 1).



A



B

Fig. 8. A) Muhammad Siyah Qalam, Herat. B) Details of the work. Source: Grabar, 2011, 85.

Table 1. Defamiliarization on the non-structural and structural levels in the works of Siyah Qalam. Source: authors.

Level of defamiliarization	Defamiliarization devices	Items
Non-structural level	Subject matter	Demons, desert dwellers, strange creatures, ordinary people, and everyday life
	New combinations	Combining multiple cultures (Central Asian tribes and nomads, shamanic rituals, and Chinese painting)
	Personification	Attributing human emotions such as anger or fear, to rocks and hills
Structural level	Exaggeration	Limbs and bodies of figures, their mannerisms, and their position on the page
	Repetition	Using many lines and dots to create a sense of form
	Technique	Outline drawing in ink with hints of watercolor reds, blues, greens, and golds

Conclusion

The works of “Muhammad Siyah Qalam” display characteristics that set them apart from the mainstream Persian miniature - characteristics that qualify as devices of defamiliarization. Analyzing art from a defamiliarization standpoint allows us to see how an artist portrays the world in a different light. Shklovsky argued that art prolongs perception - perception being viewed as an aesthetical end in itself - and creates a different understanding. This research reviewed Siyah Qalam’s surviving works and found that he created defamiliarization on both the non-structural and structural levels. His themes, new combinations, and personifications are responsible for the defamiliarization on the former level; and his use of exaggeration, repetition, and technique has resulted in defamiliarization on the latter level. In conclusion, “Muhammad Siyah Qalam” was a painter who rose above the general rules of Persian miniature, as his works bear witness.

Endnote

1. In the Islamic world, art was directly associated with fotowat - a Sufi order, meaning magnanimity or chivalry. This association meant that people were required to enter the order of fotowat and reach spiritual maturity before they could practice a craft (Pazouki, 2015, 47).
2. He ascended the throne in Merv in 1457, when Khorasan was in turmoil. He was a patron of literature and the arts, and his renowned vizier, Emir Ali-Shir Nava’i, brought fame to his court and prosperity to his capital, Herat.
3. A prominent Timurid-era poet, scholar and politician and a contemporary of Sultan Husayn Bayqara.
4. A Timurid prince, son of Shah Rukh and grandson of Timur. He was a patron of the arts and architecture, politician, and top calligrapher of his time.
5. The fourth son of Timur, who later succeeded him and became one of the greatest Timurid kings.
6. During the Renaissance, demons came to be associated with positive things. Also, in the strange world of alchemy, they were believed to help with achieving the elixir of life; therefore, occultists may have viewed them as odd and alluring rather than horrifying (Eco, 2016, 105).
7. While Kamal ud-Din Behzad also paid attention to ordinary people and everyday life in his art, he never went beyond the rules of Persian miniature.

8. The rocks in the works of Sultan Muhammad also resemble humans, but in Siyah Qalam’s paintings, rocks display human emotions such as anger or fear in addition to having a humanlike appearance.
9. One of the earliest well-known Persian miniaturists, with a style of his own. Taught painting by his father, he worked as a court painter for Abu Sa’id Bahadur Khan, the last Ilkhanid ruler.
10. A 14th century painter, famous for his ink drawings.

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**HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE**

Zargham, A. & Dastyari, E. (2021). A look at the defamiliarization devices in the works of Muhammad Siyah Qalam. *Bagh-e Nazar*, 18(95), 53-62.

DOI: 10.22034/BAGH.2020.237038.4581

URL: http://www.bagh-sj.com/article_128760.html

