Abstract. This article surveys the images of demons in the illustrations of Qajar period (19th century) in Iran. As a background, the concepts of demons have been briefly studied in four categories of Iranian myths, epic poems, Islamic culture and folk tales because it seems to be impossible to appreciate the images of demons without possessing adequate knowledge about functions of this odd creature in other cultural aspects. The dual opposition between good and evil plays a dominant role in Iranian believes which is clearly reflected in the four categories. The images of demons have been changed through different periods of time which were in direct connection with belief of people as well as social situations. The Persian painting in Safavid era (18th century) was a suitable context for demonstrating imaginary worlds because the painters of this period used two dimensional visual expressions and never tried to illustrate exactly what they observed. Travelling abroad, getting acquaintance with modern ideas and constitutionalism movement in 19th century as well as entering new technology such as photography and printing industry were some of the most influential causes which affected Qajar painting. The images of demons which altered in 19th century were directly related to cultural interaction between "East" and "West". Idealistic vision of Safavid painters changed into naturalistic one and the imaginary illustrations of demons altered to more realistic images. On the other hand as the result of the constitutional movements, many progressive newspapers began to be published in which the demons were represented as the symbols of dictatorship, poverty and ignorance. By studying about 50 illustrations, this article surveys the images of demons in 19th century in Iran regarding the social situations in which these illustrations have been created.

Keywords: Demons, Comparative study, Persian painting, Qajar art.

1. Introduction

Iranian traditional painting has been always much related to Persian literature and the main context of the most brilliant illustrations were mostly famous stories and poems. The painters did their best to demonstrate the scenes of narrated stories and make them visible. They usually observed the real objects around them and combined different elements which finally enabled them to resurrect an imaginary scene. For illustrating the imaginary creatures like demons, the painters needed not only a very creative imagination but a good knowledge of different allegorical concepts. On the other hand, the illustrators should demonstrate not a tangible and material world but the scenes which belong to a spiritual and immaterial one. The concepts of demons in Persian literature were not always the same and they were changed according to historical and social events. Dissimilar ideas about demons found their way from myths to epic poems and sometimes new connotations were formed while religious idea combined with folk beliefs.

2. Demons in Iranian culture

2.1. Demons in Arian beliefs

Indian and Persian people have many beliefs in common as they are both the immigrated branches of Arians. Many elements of ancient Iranian myths can be found in Indian ones. The people of both nations
used to worship the same gods divided into two main groups. Osoure was pious powers who were in endless fight with Diou who were evil creatures. Thereafter the Osoureh descended from their godly positions to evil powers in Indian myths while in Persian myths, they were the Diou who received the same change [1].

2.2. Demons in Zoroastrian Beliefs

The Arian gods entered into Zoroastrian beliefs. In Avesta (the Zoroastrian holy book), the people who worship the demons (Div in Persian) are called Daevyasna. The Zoroastrians started to worship Ahouramazda instead of Doa, the Indian God. In Persian language, Ahoura is the same as Asoura in Sanskrit. It is narrated in Avesta that six demons were created by Ahriman (the evil-doer God) while Hormoz (the light God) created six good gods. Female demons, called Pari, have been mentioned in the holy book of Zoroastrian too. They are described as very delicate and beauteous creatures whose origins are from fire. In Avesta they are characterized in two different ways; sometimes very beneficent and in some cases so vicious. The mankind is sometimes deceived by her odious beauty [2].

2.3. Demons in epic poems

Demons play a very dominate role in Shahn-nameh, the most important epic book, where many poems about battles between heroes and demons have been narrated. Apart from this specific role, demons have been mentioned in shah-nameh who encompasses some nefarious aspects of the mankind like greed, anger and jealousy [3].

2.4. Demons in Religious and Folk tales

There are many tales about demons in religious culture for instance Suleiman, the prophet, led an army of human beings, animals and birds as well as demons and angels. Demons appear in oral tales too. A female demon called Aal is accused for killing newborn babies in some rural regions. The same story is narrated about another demons called Om-sebian (the mother of children) who embraces the children so passionately that causes their death!! Demons have very powerful presence in superstitious beliefs so oral tales are full of terrific demons owning great abilities. Folk tales of every specific region contain some local elements as well as combination of epic, mythical or religious ones.

3. Demons in Safavid era

Illustrations of demons in 18th century (under Safavid dynasty) usually appear in epic poems such as Shah-nameh. Demonstrating demons as imaginary creatures are in complete harmony with Safavid style because total atmosphere of traditional miniatures was two dimensioned. The artists never tried to portrait real world and instead of using perspective (in its western concept), they tried to demonstrate their own imaginary world. As an example the battle of king Houshang with Black demon (Fig. 1), is noticeable. This is an illustration for Tahmash Shah-nameh created in Tabriz, one of the most important cultural zones in Iran. Kioumars, the first king in Shah-nameh, is attentively observing the battle of his grandson whit Black Demon. This was a battle for taking vengeance; Siamak who was Houshang's father was already slain by Black Demon. So Houshang decided to conquer the killer of his father as a heroic gesture. According to Avesta, he asked for the help of Nahid by offering her some sacrifices. Then he collected an army of birds, lions, tigers, wolves as well as angels and started his journey for defeating Black Demon. This beautiful illustration is a typical example of 18th century painting in Iran. The intricate and complexion of the illustration is a reflection of the story which contains epic and mythical elements. The painting is covered with delicate details creating an elusive atmosphere.

4. Demons in Qajar era

In 19th century (under Qajar dynasty), demons appeared not only in illustrated manuscripts produced in court libraries but in printed book, and newspapers too. As the result of fundamental social change of the time which led to constitutionalism movement, many aspects of cultural life were deeply altered. Printing industry and photography were two basic factors which strongly influenced Iranian illustrations in 19th century. The battle of Rostam (the most important hero in Shah-nameh) with a demon called Ekvan is
illustrated in different manuscripts and printed books (“Fig. 2”). Multiple characters of the 18th century scenes are summarized to only two main warriors and the details of the landscape are greatly limited. On the other hand the photographic vision of 19th century is evident; Rostam and the demon have been fixed in a certain moment as if they pose for talking a photo!! Rostam wears the usual costume of Qajar kings and his black and thick beard and mustache are typical signs of the noble courtmen. The most significant point of this illustration is the lack of epic atmosphere. Demonstrating a grand battle between the most reputed heroes of Iranian culture (Rostam) with a demon is descended to a caricature-like painting. Heroic battles of Rostam with different demons were favorite subjects to be illustrated by tile painters in Qajar era. The final moment of conquering White Demon is painted on the wall of the old gate of Tehran “Fig. 3”. Apart from White Demon, there are other demons in the painting who are watching the scene with great fear and anxiety.

Entering printing industry to Iran in 19th century (lithography) caused influential change in traditional painting. The courtmen used to have a monopoly on illustrated manuscripts and the folk had no access to them but printed copies made different books available. In spite of this important strong point, the quality of illustrations descended to lower place and the exclusive manuscripts were nearly vanished. A lithographic copy of Shah-nameh printed in India contains an illustration which shows the battle of Rostam with a demon (Fig. 4). Printing industry provided a wonderful opportunity for oral tales to be written and illustrated. That is why many demons found their way to lithographic book. Many religious stories which were dearly loved by ordinary people were published too. In one illustration Soleyman the prophet is surrounded by earthly creatures such as birds and lions. As well as some demons; a beautiful angel wearing ordinary costume of Qajar era offering Soleyman a famous ring (Fig. 5).

As the result of social and cultural changes in 19th century, the ancient concept of demons was greatly changed. Revolutionary newspaper used familiar symbols to introduce modern concepts and satirical newspapers became very popular. As majority of ordinary people were illiterate in those days, the cartoons seemed to be an appropriate way for intellectuals to convey their progressive messages to the public. Demons were symbolized as some evil concepts such as dictatorship, cruelty and injustice. For instance a cartoon shows a demon who stubbed the Iranian National parliament (Fig. 6). The cartoon implies the effort of some men to wind up the parliament in those days.

5. Conclusion

Eternal battle between dual apposition of evil and pious has been always one of the most fundamental beliefs of Iranian people and the concept of demon as the symbol of extreme mischief has played a significant role in implying human villainy as well as natural catastrophes. In Arian beliefs, demon acted as the accomplices of Ahreeman to fight against Ahooora. Transmitting to Zoroastrian beliefs, the same idea was reformed in various shapes. In epic poems, demos saved their basic functions but became more earthly, they possessed their own lands and performed many human deeds such as agronomy; they even used war tools. In some cases they were more advanced than human beings for instance they taught Tahmoores (a hero of Shah-nameh) how to write and read but they frequently fought against different heroes in epic stories. On the other hand demons were symbolized as some human dreadful characteristics so we encounter the demon of jealousy or the demon of anger in epic poems. In Islamic culture demons appeared in some stories among them the narrative of Soleyman , the prophet is the most typical.

It is essential to mention that there is not a rigid interval between various cultural categories so many concepts move from one to another and find new shapes and meanings. On the other hand there are examples of conversion of demons into dragons or elves. In folk culture, demons are believed to be terrible and frightful creatures that cause different illness as well as natural calamities. In folk tales, a ghastly demon and there is always a handsome hero who finally save the girl. Due to direct relationship between Persian literature and painting, many stories about demons were illustrated during different periods of time but apart from being loyal to the text; the artists added some elements of their imaginations to the paintings.

The style of 18th century painting (Safavid era) provided the painters a suitable opportunity to demonstrate imaginary creatures like demons. Showing inner and outer spaces at the same time and demonstrating the non synchronous events on the same frame were some of characteristics of traditional painting. On the other hand the traditional painters did not care about using colors inspired from real nature
but they colored the drawings according to their own esthetical tastes. Absence of perspective helped the traditional miniatures to introduce an unreal atmosphere which was necessary for displaying demons. In the last decades of 18th century some European painter were invited to Safavid court moreover a few Iranian student were sent to European countries to learn methods of western painting. Photography entered to Iran only a few years after its invention in France and became very popular among court men and Qajar king himself. Lack of light and shadow, absence of perspective and linear drawing instead of voluminal representation which were characteristics of 18th century painting gave way to more realistic visual expression. Instead of showing utopian world, the painters of 19th century did their best to demonstrate the real world, so the process of Naturalism in Iran which had begun from the last decades of 18th century, found its way to Qajar period (19th century and naturalistic visual expression finally conquered traditional painting the concepts of demons were change too. As the result of constitutional movement and modern ideas came from Europe, demons appeared in revolutionary news papers as social and political symbols. It seems possible to summarize the whole process of illustrating demons in a phrase: Demons gradually descended from the skies and settled down on the earth.

6. References


Fig. 1: 18th century Shah-nameh                                         Fig. 2: 19th century Shah-nameh
Fig. 3: Tile Painting in Tehran.

Fig. 4: Lithographic Shah-nameh

Fig. 5: Lithographic Book.

Fig. 6: Lithographic Newspaper.