

**The Tale of the Buraq's Tail:  
Reading the Buraq's Journey Through Indo-Persian Literature in a  
Comparative Study of Buraq Imagery**

By

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## ABSTRACT

In my thesis, I analyse two composite animal Buraq paintings from the Medieval Deccan. These two paintings, apparent copies of each other, are significantly different from other images of the Buraq in the Muslim world. Instead of placing the Buraq in a narrative scene, the Buraq takes up the whole visual space in an icon-like manner. The visual drama of the Buraq's journey is placed inside its body rather than in a surrounding landscape; the Deccani Buraqs are composite animals with numerous creatures filling their bodies. Additionally, the two Buraqs feature an atypical tail: this tail is the head of a dragon. In my thesis, I begin by searching for possible interpretations of the dragon-head element through a study of dragons in Indo-Persian literature popular in the Medieval Deccan. This analysis leads me to conclude that the dragon is an embodiment of the ego that must be tamed in order to progress along a spiritual quest. From there, I interpret the other animals in the Buraq's body through a structural analysis of romantic Indian and Persian epics connected to the Buraq imagery through their depictions of animals, steeds, and the Buraq. My research shows how the Buraq paintings illustrate the spiritual journeys of Sufi disciples. The Sufi spiritual journey is connected to the Buraq because it is often described as a Personal Mi'raj that mirrors the Prophet's ascension to Jerusalem and the heavens that he took on the back of the angel Gabriel and the flying ungulate, the Buraq. Through allusions to Persianate literatures in the composite elements of the paintings, the Buraq images embody the stages of the Sufi spiritual journey. The animal menagerie in the Buraq references a wild landscape that the heroes of romantic epics must cross to fulfill a quest. Before the heroes can find ease in the hardship of their journey, they must find peace with themselves and with the animal-filled landscape. To navigate the wilderness, the heroes find helpers who take the form of wild animals, a trained steed, or a Sufi ascetic. As the hero strives for union with their Beloved (often understood as a symbol for God),

they conquer their egos and embody ascetic traits that correspond with the teachings of Sufism.

This literature reveals two archetypes: the hero who must complete a quest and a helper who guides him along his way. These archetypes correspond with the hierarchy of a Sufi tariqa or school: namely, the romantic hero becomes like a Sufi disciple who must submit to a Sufi leader who serves as a Spiritual Helper. My analysis reveals the Buraq as a symbolic archetype for the Sufi spiritual leader. While the Buraq serves as the Prophet's vehicle accelerating his journey of Isra and Mi'raj, the Sufi leader accelerates their disciple's spiritual journey by offering them guidance along the spiritual path. As a whole, the dialogue between the Buraq paintings and literature of the Indo-Persian tradition reveals a connection between Buraq imagery and Medieval Indian Sufi Muslim practice. The Buraq paintings act as visual allegories of the Sufi Spiritual Journey, often described as a Personal Mi'raj. The Buraq paintings connect the Prophet's Mi'raj with the Sufi disciple's spiritual journey through the archetype of the Spiritual Helper, a role fulfilled by the Buraq in the air and by the Sufi leader here on Earth.

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## CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iv
Table of Figures.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Context.....	1
Theory and Method.....	6
Overview.....	6
Iconology .....	6
Corpus .....	9
Limitations.....	13
Historical Background.....	14
Preliminary Image Analysis .....	23
The Dragon in the Buraq .....	29
The Lover, the Beloved, and the Guide .....	45
Conclusion.....	72
Works Cited.....	75
Appendix .....	84
Appendix I: Note on Dates.....	84
Appendix II: Note on Spelling .....	84
Appendix III: Timeline of Empires and Dynasties of the Deccan.....	85
Appendix IV: Description of the Buraq in Nizami .....	85

## TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1 The Fabulous Creature Buraq. C. 1660-1680, Deccan (probably Golconda), likely Qutb Shahi Dynasty (1518-1687). The Metropolitan Museum, <a href="https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/453334">https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/453334</a> . .....	11
Figure 2 Al-Buraq. C. 1770-1775, Hyderabad, probably under Hyderabad Nizams (1724-1948). National Museum New Delhi, Google Arts and Culture, <a href="https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/al-buraq/GQFKm5AzrQbkBA">https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/al-buraq/GQFKm5AzrQbkBA</a> . .....	12
Figure 3 “India in the Time of Clive & Warren Hastings.” Philips' New Historical Atlas For Students, 1917. ....	17
Figure 4 Mohammadinezhad, Kourosh. The Battle of the Man and Two Dragons. 2019. Persian miniature painting by contemporary artist. Copy of the 1676 painting by Mu'in Musavvir, British Museum, <a href="https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1949-0709-0-11">https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1949-0709-0-11</a> . Used with permission of the artist. .	29
Figure 5 Detail, al-Buraq. Hyderabad 1770-1780.....	30
Figure 6 Detail, The Fabulous Creature Buraq. Golconda 1660-1680.....	30
Figure 7 Bihzad. Mohan's Horse turns into a Dragon. C. 1943 Herat, from a Khamsa of Nizami. British Library, <a href="https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2014/07/a-khamsah-ascribed-to-the-painter-bihzad-add-25900.html">https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2014/07/a-khamsah-ascribed-to-the-painter-bihzad-add-25900.html</a> . ....	31
Figure 8 Bahram Gur killing the dragon. 1610 Mughal India, from the Khamsa by Nizami Ganjavi. British Museum, <a href="https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1927-0413-0-1">https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1927-0413-0-1</a> .....	34
Figure 9 Raksh helps Rostam defeat a dragon. C. 1450, from Firdawsi, Shahnameh. British Library, <a href="https://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/inside/gallery/dragon/dragon.html">https://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/inside/gallery/dragon/dragon.html</a> . ....	36
Figure 10 Daswanth. Umar slays the dragon. C. 1567-72, from the Hamzehnameh, commissioned by Emperor Akbar. Austrian Museum of Applied Arts. ....	38
Figure 11 Sheikh Zahid Saving Sukrkheh (Red) Faqih from the “Dragon of the Mind.” 1582 Shiraz, from the Safvat al-Safa by Isma'il bin Bazzaz. Aga Khan Museum, <a href="https://agakhanmuseum.org/collection/artifact/shaykh-zahid-saving-sorhe-red-faqih-from-the-dragon-of-the-mind-akm264-fol76v">https://agakhanmuseum.org/collection/artifact/shaykh-zahid-saving-sorhe-red-faqih-from-the-dragon-of-the-mind-akm264-fol76v</a> . ....	40
Figure 12 Sagittarius. Herat, from the Aja'ib al-Makhluqat of Qazvini. Taken from Titley, Dragons in Persian, Mughal and Turkish Art.....	42
Figure 13 Pir (Elder) Ali Parniqi's Dream of the Sheikh with Prophet Muhammad. 1582 Shiraz, from the Safvat al-Safa by Isma'il bin Bazzaz. Aga Khan Museum, <a href="https://agakhanmuseum.org/collection/artifact/pir-elder-ali-parniqi-s-dream-of-the-shaykh-with-prophet-muhammad-akm264-foll16v">https://agakhanmuseum.org/collection/artifact/pir-elder-ali-parniqi-s-dream-of-the-shaykh-with-prophet-muhammad-akm264-foll16v</a> . ....	44
Figure 14 Detail, The Fabulous Creature Buraq. Golconda 1660-1680.....	45

Figure 15 Detail, al-Buraq. Hyderabad 1770-1780. ....	45
Figure 16 The Mi'raj of the Prophet. 1539-43, from the Khamsa of Nizami. Commissioned by Shah Tahmasp I. Wikimedia Commons, <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Miraj_by_Sultan_Muhammad.jpg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Miraj_by_Sultan_Muhammad.jpg</a> . ....	48
Figure 17 Portrait of Nusrati writing the Gulshan-I Ishq. 1743 Deccan India, from the Gulshan-I Ishq by Nusrati. Philadelphia Museum of Art, <a href="https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/338342.html">https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/338342.html</a> .50	
Figure 18 Flying Fairies Transport a Sleeping Prince Manohar to the Princess's Palace. 1743 Deccan India, from the Gulshan-I Ishq by Nusrati. Philadelphia Museum of Art, <a href="https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/338417.html?mulR=689489868">https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/338417.html?mulR=689489868</a> . ....	53
Figure 19 Majnun in the wilderness. Late 16th century iran. Metropolitan museum, <a href="https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/450588">https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/450588</a> . ....	57
Figure 20 Narsing. Layla visits Majnun in the Wilderness. 1597-98 Lahore, Mughal India, from the Khamsa by Amir Khusraw Dihlavi, commissioned by Emperor Akbar. The Walters Museum, <a href="https://art.thewalters.org/detail/31624/layl-visits-majnun-in-the-wilderness/">https://art.thewalters.org/detail/31624/layl-visits-majnun-in-the-wilderness/</a> . ....	58
Figure 21 A Sea Serpent Attacks Prince Manohar's Fleet. 1743 Deccan India, from the Gulshan-I Ishq by Nusrati. Philadelphia Museum of Art, <a href="https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338553">https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338553</a> . ....	59
Figure 22 King Bikram searches for the holy man. 1743 Deccan India, from the Gulshan-I Ishq by Nusrati. Philadelphia Museum of Art, <a href="https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/634-549.html#object/338360">https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/634-549.html#object/338360</a> . ....	60
Figure 23 Prince Manohar receives a magic ring from a hermit. 1743 Deccan India, from the Gulshan-I Ishq by Nusrati. Philadelphia Museum of Art, <a href="https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338577">https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338577</a> . ....	62
Figure 24 Prince Manohar slicing the demon into pieces. 1743 Deccan India, from the Gulshan-I Ishq by Nusrati. Philadelphia Museum of Art, <a href="https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338619">https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338619</a> . ....	64
Figure 25 Princess Madhumalati Meets Prince Manohar In a Garden Pavilion. 1743 Deccan India, from the Gulshan-I Ishq by Nusrati. Philadelphia Museum of Art, <a href="https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338669">https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338669</a> . ....	67
Figure 26 Manohar and Madhumalati Taking Leave at the Seaside En Route to Manohar's Future Kingdom. 1743 Deccan India, from the Gulshan-I Ishq by Nusrati. Philadelphia Museum of Art, <a href="https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338829">https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338829</a> . ....	69
Figure 27 Timeline of Empires and Dynasties of the Deccan .....	85

## INTRODUCTION

### CONTEXT

*The Prophet further said, "He then took out my heart. Then a gold tray of Belief was brought to me and my heart was washed and was filled (with Belief) and then returned to its original place. Then a white animal which was smaller than a mule and bigger than a donkey was brought to me." (On this Al-Jarud asked, "Was it the Buraq, O Abu Hamza?" I (i.e. Anas) replied in the affirmative). The Prophet said, "The animal's step (was so wide that it) reached the farthest point within the reach of the animal's sight. I was carried on it, and Gabriel set out with me till we reached the nearest heaven. When he asked for the gate to be opened, it was asked, 'Who is it?' Gabriel answered, 'Gabriel.' It was asked, 'Who is accompanying you?' Gabriel replied, 'Muhammad.' It was asked, 'Has Muhammad been called?' Gabriel replied in the affirmative. Then it was said, 'He is welcomed. What an excellent visit his is!'*

(From Hadith 227, *Sahih al-Bukhari*)<sup>1</sup>.

The Prophet's journey by night, known as the *Isra* and *Mi'raj*, figures large in the imagination of the Muslim community. On one holy night, the Prophet flew on an animal called the Buraq to Jerusalem, from where he was able to ascend to the heavens and meet God, the angels, and the Prophets who came before him. This story is significant to the Muslim community for many reasons: it establishes the five daily prayers, describes the afterlife that awaits Muslims good and bad, and defines the Muslim community where those who believe the story are Muslims and those who do not are non-Muslims<sup>2</sup>. Whether this miraculous journey took place in body or in spirit is hotly debated<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, whether a physical journey or an imagined one, its significance to the Muslim community is apparent, as evidenced by countless *Mi'raj* accounts

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<sup>1</sup> References to the Buraq are also found in *Hadith Muslim* 309 and 314.

<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Rustomji describes, the Prophet's visit to the afterworld proved that it "existed as a place" (36).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed review of these debates throughout the history of the Muslim community, see R. P. Buckley's *The Night Journey and Ascension in Islam*.



(*Mirajnameh*)<sup>4</sup>, the celebration of the *Shab-e-Miraj* (night of Mi'raj), and the prevalence of the Mi'raj in Islamic visual culture.

In my study, I do not expect to cover all aspects of the Mi'raj journey's impact on Muslim communities; instead, I focus on one detail: the animal named "Buraq." The name "Buraq" comes from the Arabic word for lightning, *barq*. But when Muslims picture the Buraq, they picture a beautiful animal, not a lightning bolt. This animal only gets a fleeting mention in the Hadith and is not mentioned in the Qur'an at all (Hadith 227, 309); given this lack of descriptions in canonical Islamic scripture, one would not expect it to have much cultural significance. However, the Mi'raj journey is likely the most illustrated episode of the Prophet's life and thus makes a considerable contribution to Islamic art. Nevertheless, without any descriptions of the animal's appearance in canonical Islamic texts, how would the artists even know how to paint it, and why would it be of so much interest in the first place? Furthermore, the physical appearance of the Buraq has no bearing on Islamic jurisprudence, so why would anyone care? Despite these questions, with minimal guidance from religious literature, Muslims depicted a Buraq that flew out of their own imaginations and in so doing created an enduring artistic tradition.

The Buraq is one of the most common subjects in figurative Islamic art and "one of the most common motifs in illustrations of the Prophet's life" (Elias, Diesel 152). Even today, it is a popular motif, commonly used in festivals, truck decoration, and more (*ibid.*)<sup>5</sup>. Buraq imagery persists despite the common misconception that Islam forbids the depiction of humans and animals. While scholars like Christiane Gruber have studied Islamic figurative imagery extensively, Muslims and non-Muslims alike often consider figurative art un-Islamic<sup>6</sup>. Accordingly, the study of Islamic figurative art has often been hushed away in academia, while the suggestion that Islamic art

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<sup>4</sup> For full translations of *mirajnameh*, see Christiane Gruber's *Ilkhanid Book of Ascension* and *Timurid Book of Ascension*.

<sup>5</sup> Yasmine Seale describes a number of popular depictions of the Buraq in her short article "Out of Their Love They Made It: A Visual History of Buraq."

<sup>6</sup> See Gruber's book, *The Image Debate*, for more information about controversies surrounding figurative art in Islamic contexts. She describes how, though the "use of figural likenesses in private, non-devotional contexts was neither prohibited in the Qur'an nor was it contested at the beginning of Islam," nonetheless, "theological debates" around the use of images developed in later centuries (*Image Debate* 11). Her articles "Between Logos (Kalima) And Light (Nūr): Representations Of The Prophet Muhammad In Islamic Painting," "In Defense and Devotion," and "Signs of the Hour: Eschatological Imagery in Islamic Book Arts" also elaborate on the uses of figurative imagery in Islamic contexts. Persis Berlekamp also discusses the use of figural imagery in Islamic contexts, arguing that the use of images goes beyond non-religious uses by "inducing wonder at God's creation" (ix).

includes anything but geometric patterns or perhaps the occasional flower or bird is often met with outrage.<sup>7</sup>

In this thesis, I am not investigating the legality of depictions of animals and humans in Islamic communities. Whether an individual chooses to create, buy, or use images of animals and humans is not my concern. I instead focus on the phenomenology of Islamic art by bringing attention to how Buraq images have been used in Muslim communities, in particular, the Islamic Deccan.<sup>8</sup> In my thesis, I highlight interpretations of Buraq imagery that could correspond to the understandings of contemporary interpretive communities.

I begin my study by cataloguing multiple depictions of the Buraq in an online Story Map that includes paintings, sculptures, and other media from across the world. These images cover a large range of the Islamic world, with the majority fitting into what Shahab Ahmed terms “The Balkans to Bengal Complex.” This map is the basis for the selection of my corpus that includes two depictions of the Buraq from 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century Deccan India<sup>9</sup>. The two artifacts I selected are

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<sup>7</sup> I came across an example of this public outrage with a seemingly innocent Instagram post (DaakVaak, “Buraq with the Taj Mahal.”) The post writes: “This poster from India depicts the winged horse believed to have carried the Prophet Mohammad to heaven. For long, the lore has inspired much art across the world.” However well-intentioned, this post did not land well with many of the page’s followers. Countless commenters were insulted by the Buraq’s image, declaring it offensive and un-Islamic, asking DaakVaak to take it down, and threatening to unfollow their page. Evidently, images like these are a part of Muslim practice, if not for everybody, at least for some. Yet, so many Muslim followers of the page wanted to cast out the unknown creators of the poster from the Islamic community. Daak Vaak could have replied by censoring the image and thus maintaining a monolithic understanding of Islam’s relationship with art. However, they chose to keep it up, and in so doing, they spread awareness of this artwork, feeding the curiosity of their viewers, as evidenced by the many commenters who wanted to know more about the Buraq and its image.

<sup>8</sup> Shahab Ahmed describes how, in the modern period, Islam has largely been flattened to questions of Islamic law. The creation of an “Islam-proper,” contrasted from the “Islamicate” or cultural aspects of Islam, “gives primacy to, only some selected part of the human and historical phenomenon (usually, Islamic law) as being, somehow, more properly or authentically “Islamic” and, thus, as Islam, thereby marginalizing, disenfranchising, or altogether excluding other parts of the historical phenomenon” (Ahmed 115). I would argue that art, literature, and culture can be just as Islamic as Islamic law. Carl Ernst expresses this idea in his study of South Asian Sufism, stating that “the religious element in human life” may be “expressed in art, story, social structure, gesture, or ritual” (*Eternal Garden* 18). Therefore, I wish to include the study of art in the larger project of Islamic Studies. Furthermore, like Shahab, I do not advocate for the use of the term “Islamicate” to qualify Muslim practice. Instead, I use the term Islamic as far as it brings meaning to that which I am studying; as Shahab Ahmed urge, I ask myself “what meaning is added by qualifying that phenomenon or object by the word Islamic?” (545). As the Buraq is an animal from Islamic mythology, depictions of it clearly gain meaning by the qualification of “Islamic.”

<sup>9</sup> Artistic production thrived in Golconda, Bijapur, and the rest of the Deccan as their courts benefitted from significant material wealth. However, despite the abundance of artistic works (many of which are housed at the Salar Jung Museum), Deccani art has for long been either ignored or lumped in with Mughal art. As of yet, there has been no major digitisation program at the Salar Jung Museum, which may account for the lack of scholarship. The larger American and British institutions, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, The Metropolitan Museum, or the British Museum, have had almost all artifacts digitised and made available for scholars and laymen alike to view artifacts from across the world. In the case of the Salar Jung Museum, there are only a few photos of galleries available to see online, and thus these artifacts present more significant barriers to public access.

composite animal paintings that feature a dragon's-head tail. I selected my specific corpus for three attributes: firstly, they were unique amongst depictions of the Buraq by having dragon's-head tails; secondly, both artifacts were from the same region; and thirdly, these images were some of the only depictions of the Buraq that feature the animal alone rather than within a larger scene<sup>10</sup>.

These images do not closely correspond to the descriptions of the Buraq in Islamic literature; therefore, I turn to other sources to explain their appearance. I take a wide look at canonical Indo-Persian literature to uncover referent texts that could have inspired the artists' visual program<sup>11</sup>. I begin by looking at the distinguishing element in my chosen Buraq images: the dragon tail. I explain dragon symbolism in the Deccan by analyzing the function of dragons in three Indo-Persian epics: the *Shahnameh*, the *Hamzehnameh*, and *Haft Paykar*. In each story, a dragon appears as an obstacle along the route of a heroic quest. To understand the religious meaning of this obstacle, I turn to a passage in the hagiography of the Sufi Sheikh Ardabili that shows a spiritual meaning behind the dragon as an embodiment of the ego that must be tamed in order for a Sufi disciple to progress along a spiritual quest. From here, I turn to three more texts to interpret the other animals within the composite image. These texts, *Khusrau va Shirin*, *Layla va Majnun*, and the *Gulshan-I Ishq*, are also epics, though specifically of the romantic variety. All three of these texts are known as allegories of the *Personal Mi'raj*: a concept used in Sufi communities to describe a path of spiritual growth that mirrors the Prophet's night journey. I do a structural analysis of these three texts, mapping them along the steps of a Sufi initiate's *Mir'aj*-like spiritual journey.

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Nonetheless, interest in Deccani art has been increasing considerably. Images of Deccani art have been made publicly available through a partnership between the National Museum in New Delhi with Google Arts and Culture, as well as through digital collections in Western institutions. In recent times, more and more scholars are focusing on Deccani art. Interdisciplinary scholars like Richard Eaton emphasize the uniqueness of Deccani art; he says: "the artistic production of the Deccan is not merely derivative of other northern traditions, rather, Deccani art and architecture stand very much in a class of their own" ("A History" 3).

<sup>10</sup> See "Corpus" section of this thesis for images.

<sup>11</sup> I understand paintings, sculptures, and other artistic endeavours as *texts*, and as such, I make an effort not to flatten their polysemous meanings. Each text has multiple "interpretive communities" where "readers of books as members of a community (...) share common meanings about literary texts" (Berkowitz 1). As I search for meaning in artistic production, I know that there is no one answer as the elusive "meaning" of a work of art is filtered through the countless people who perceive it. Therefore, I do not pretend that my interpretation of the Buraq image is the only possible interpretation.

The Buraq composite paintings are part of a larger tradition of South Asian composite animals<sup>12</sup>. However, I look at the Buraq composite animals not simply as novelties, but as vehicles for specific cultural meaning<sup>13</sup>. From my structural analysis of the Buraq along the lines of Sufi thought, I conclude that the Composite Buraq paintings embody the whole of the spiritual journey. The Buraq paintings allow the viewer to see many steps of the journey to the Beloved God in a single glance. Furthermore, the Buraq embodies the “spiritual helper” archetype: like a Sufi Pir who guides a seeker of God on their spiritual path, the Buraq guides the Prophet along a vast desert landscape.

The relationship of the Buraq to the Prophet as spiritual guide is analogous to that of a Sufi master and his disciple. Thus, the Buraq image contains the Personal Mi'raj within the accepted power structures of Sufi communities. However, despite the elitism implicit in the Sufi initiation process, these communities were also open to people of all castes, ethnicities, and religions. In a context where most people were illiterate, the visual mode is a great way of conveying religious information<sup>14</sup>. Buraq imagery is one area that occurs so frequently in both courtly and vernacular art. Whether the Buraq is depicted as a composite animal, a horse, a lion, or anything else, it has struck a chord with Islamic communities. I hope that in my research, I can uncover how Muslims used images of the Buraq to enrich their spiritual lives.

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<sup>12</sup> There are many examples of composite animals in a similar style to the Deccani Buraqs. Composite animal paintings have been made across many regions of India over many centuries, using various animal frames such as elephants and camels. These paintings appear to be associated with many different religious and ethnic groups from South Asia. See my story map at <https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymaps/ccf097a0b5ed84fa59e3fe6f3bf7e03e/voyage-of-the-buraq/index.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> The origins of South Asian composite animals are as of yet unknown, though there is speculation that they originated in Central Asia (Ekhtiar et. al. 382). Nonetheless, the Buraq composite animals seem to be the models for other South Asian composite animals (ibid).

<sup>14</sup> Visual art, just like writing, is an important part of religious communication. Jamal J. Elias argues in his book *Wings of Diesel* that it is inequitable to limit Islamic material to text alone; “If one accepts the premise that Muslims, more so than others, are a ‘textual’ people,” he argues, “one would have to contend that the majority of Muslims have not, until very recently, participated in any substantive way in the life of their own societies, since it is only within the last fifty years (if that) that a majority of Muslims have acquired basic literacy” (12-13). Therefore, he concludes, “the visual (as well as the somatic and auditory, among other forms of experience) must play a very large part in their lives at all aggregate levels” (Elias, *Diesel* 13).

## THEORY AND METHOD

### OVERVIEW

My research begins by cataloguing several depictions of the Buraq from around the world, both 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional. Drawing from poetry, material culture<sup>15</sup>, and Isra and Mi'raj accounts, I will identify a large span of pictorial depictions of the Buraq, charting them in a map and timeline that can be viewed online. After charting many images of the Buraq, I identify two artifacts from a single region, namely the Islamic Deccan<sup>16</sup>. I will look for meaning in the images through extensive research on their cultural, historical, and religious contexts, using the iconological framework introduced by Erwin Panofsky<sup>17</sup>. My primary source for interpretation is the popular literature<sup>18</sup> of the contemporary society surrounding the paintings. Through a structural analysis of Indo-Persian literature, I determine possible meanings behind the natural and fantastical imagery contained within the Buraq composite animals. I look at both small details of the images as well as the Buraq as a whole. I explore possible connections to the Buraq iconography as the animal symbolism and literary referents relate to Islamic theology. I hope to uncover the significance of the Buraq and its imagery in both the religious practice and artistic tradition of the Medieval Deccan.

### ICONOLOGY

I will be using the method of "Iconology," as advanced by Aby Warburg<sup>19</sup> and Erwin Panofsky and adapted to suit my research. The goal of iconology is to understand an artifact in its specific context. Panofsky developed this method by applying principles of semiotics to art historical interpretation. He outlines the method by using the example of a man tipping his hat: "To understand the significance of the gentleman's action I must not only be familiar with the practical world of objects and events, but also with the more-than-practical world of customs and

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<sup>15</sup> For an introduction to the study of Material Culture, see Prown "Mind in Matter."

<sup>16</sup> When I refer to the "Islamic Deccan," I am referring to the region of the Indian Subcontinent south of the Vindhya mountains, in the places and time periods that it was ruled by Muslims. This region has many Dravidian languages and people of Dravidian ethnicity, and its culture is a combination of ancient Dravidian languages and traditions with Indo-European languages and traditions.

<sup>17</sup> For an example of the application of Panofsky's work, see "The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator."

<sup>18</sup> For more examples of connections between Persianate literature and Persianate artistic traditions, see Leyli Jamali "Colouring the Words: Reproduction of Persian Literature through the Art of Iranian Miniature."

<sup>19</sup> For examples of Warburg's application of the iconographical method, see "Online BilderAtlas Mnemosyne."

cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilization” (Panofsky, *Studies* 27). In order to interpret something as simple as the action of tipping one’s hat, it is necessary to be familiar with the culture in which this action is taking place. Without this knowledge, the action loses its meaning, as Panofsky describes: “Conversely, my acquaintance could not feel impelled to greet me by lifting his hat were he not conscious of the significance of this act” (ibid). As we interpret this symbolic action, we try to understand not just its immediate purpose, but more profound implications of the action for the man in his time and place:

And finally: besides constituting a natural event in space and time, beside naturally indicating moods or feeling, besides conveying a conventional greeting, the action of my acquaintance can reveal to an experienced observer all that goes to make up his ‘personality.’ This personality is conditioned by his being a man of the twentieth century, by his national, social and educational background (... and an) individual manner of viewing things and reacting to the world. (Panofsky, *Studies* 27)

Through iconology, we strive to find the “personality” of a given work, understanding both the contextual influences as well as the unique expression of an individual. This goal is achieved through a process divided into three distinct stages (from Rose 151):

1. Preiconographic Description

Preiconographic description is limited to what the naked eye can see in a given work without requiring any knowledge to identify it more specifically in its context. At this level, we conduct simply a straightforward formal analysis, identifying artistic “motifs” but nothing else (Panofsky, *Studies* 28).

2. Iconographic Analysis

In the iconographic analysis, we move to a more informed reading that someone with a blanket familiarity with the context would be able to assess. However, it remains on the descriptive level and does not involve any higher level of analysis (Panofsky, *Studies* 32).

### 3. Iconological Analysis

Iconological analysis requires a more detailed knowledge of the specific place and time in which the artifact was created. The goal is to enable understanding of both the artist's intentions and the audience's response. As an "ology" (from Greek, *study of*), it crosses over into the final, interpretive stage of analysis (Panofsky, *Studies* 32).

In this thesis, the first two stages of analysis are reversed, as I have begun my research looking for depictions of a specific iconography: the Buraq. In order to identify the Buraq images, one must already have a blanket familiarity with Buraq iconography and knowledge of the Isra and Mi'raj, as identified in the Qur'an and Hadith.

I combine iconography with the study of literature, using a comparative method. To understand motifs in Buraq imagery, I do a structural analysis of popular literature from the time of the artifacts' production. I compare the plot elements of multiple works, doing a broad genre analysis similar to Northrop Frye's Archetypal Criticism, as laid out in *The Anatomy of Criticism* (131-242)<sup>20</sup>. I compare and contrast three texts at a time in two phases of structural analysis: the first analysing the dragon imagery, and the second taking from my conclusions in the previous chapter to analyse the natural animals in the body of the Buraq. This analysis is done with the goal of understanding possible interpretations of the Buraq imagery from contemporary communities of interpretation (drawing on Stanley Fish and Reader-Response Theory). I combine methodologies from Comparative Literature Studies, such as Archetypal Criticism and Reader-Response Theory, with the art history methodology of Iconology. Given the flexibility of iconology, these methodologies can all coexist within the same project. By interpreting the iconography of the Buraq from multiple angles and using the above methodologies, I aim to illuminate iconological understandings of the Buraq composite images as they fit into the cultural and religious landscape of the Deccan.

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<sup>20</sup> As Northrop Frye writes, it is "important to get the habit of standing back and looking at the total structure of every literary work studied;" I do this through my bird's eye view analysis of six Indo-Persian texts (*Educated Imagination* 69).

## CORPUS

Before deciding on my main corpus, I surveyed depictions of the Buraq from across the Islamic world. I searched online museum catalogues and academic publications to collect a body of approximately two dozen artifacts. I then mapped these images across time and space in an online story map, which can be found at

<https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/ccf097a0b5ed84fa59e3fe6f3bf7e03e/voyage-of-the-buraq/index.html>).

I found examples of Buraq iconography from Germany to the Philippines, with the majority coming from Central Asia, South Asia, and Iran. While the area of Islamic figural imagery is still understudied, Christiane Gruber has done considerable work on pictorial depictions of the Prophet, many of which include the Buraq. She has worked on both the literature and art of Isra and Mi'raj by studying sources from Central Asia. The majority of depictions of the Buraq were found in the illustrations of manuscripts that discuss Isra and Mi'raj and other tales. However, when it comes to Indian Buraq iconography, there is very little research, especially of South Indian examples. This scarcity is not surprising given the significant lack of research on Deccan Islamic History in general. Prominent historian William Dalrymple laments this absence in a footnote in his book *White Mughals*:

It is one of the quirks of modern Indian historiography that the Deccan remains largely unstudied: little serious work has been done on any of the Deccani courts, and this remains especially true of its cultural history: Deccani paintings are still routinely misattributed to the Mughal or Rajput ateliers. In an age when every minute contour of the landscape of history appears to be rigorously mapped out by a gridiron of scholarly Ph.D.s, this huge gap is all the more remarkable. (xliv)

After mapping depictions of the Buraq, I decided to focus on two specific examples, pictured in the following pages. These two artifacts, spanning a period of at least 200 years, were all produced in the Deccan region of India. These images have significant differences from other depictions of the Buraq: firstly, while most images of the animal are in manuscript paintings that show a full scene of the Prophet Muhammad flying to Jerusalem, these paintings showed the Buraq on its own, similar to an icon. Secondly, despite the large time span between the two



paintings, they both have distinctive features: they are composite animals with human heads and a dragon-head tail. This dragon-head tail seems to be unique to this region, and therefore merits further study.

These two images, shown below, follow the Indian tradition of composite animals, with a female head and a quadruped body made up of other animals. While there is considerable variation in Buraq tails, with the typical Indian specimens (and many Persianate ones) having a peacock's tail<sup>21</sup>, the dragon's-head tail, to my knowledge, is unique. The repeated use of this feature suggests a continuous artistic tradition of Buraq iconography in the Deccan. As I study these artifacts, I explore the creation of Deccani Muslim tradition. I hope to see how text and art played a part in this community's religious beliefs and practices.

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<sup>21</sup> The image of the Buraq with the peacock's tail is also connected to depictions of the Hindu cow-goddess, Kamadhenu, such as in the painting "Kamadhenu, The Wish-Granting Cow" housed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. There are many possibilities of Islamic influence in Hinduism; being what some describe as an "open-source" religion, the practice of Hinduism can easily incorporate elements from other faiths (Kearney et al. 35). For more discussion of Hindu influences on Buraq iconography, see Tiziana Lorenzetti, "Indian Sources of the Buraq Iconography."



FIGURE 1 THE FABULOUS CREATURE BURAQ. C. 1660-1680, DECCAN (PROBABLY GOLCONDA), LIKELY QUTB SHAHI DYNASTY (1518-1687). THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, [HTTPS://WWW.METMUSEUM.ORG/ART/COLLECTION/SEARCH/453334](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/453334).



FIGURE 2 AL-BURQA. C. 1770-1775, HYDERABAD, PROBABLY UNDER HYDERABAD NIZAMS (1724-1948). NATIONAL MUSEUM NEW DELHI, GOOGLE ARTS AND CULTURE, [HTTPS://ARTSANDCULTURE.GOOGLE.COM/ASSET/AL-BURQA/GQFKM5AZRQBKBA](https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/al-buraq/GQFKM5AZRQBKBA).

## LIMITATIONS

In my study, there are limitations to what I am able to accomplish within my Master of Arts research. As I do not yet have sufficient working knowledge of Persian or Dakhni Urdu, I will mainly be working with primary documents in translation. Given that the history of the Islamic Deccan is less widely explored, I will have limited access to contemporary documents.

Within the short time period of a Master of Arts, and especially during the global COVID-19 pandemic, I am not able to travel to my region of interest. As I cannot access the artifacts in person, I will be working from images of the Buraq available online. I am trusting the museum's dating and placing of the artifacts - given the lack of sufficient research on Deccani art, it is difficult to find specific dating and provenance information. As the artifacts are unsigned, I cannot know who created them or who commissioned them. There is insufficient information to link them specifically to Shia or Sunni Islam, a specific school of Sufism, or a particular cultural group. Therefore, I analyse the artifacts through ideas common across the Deccan and to many different communities. My most important source of information is the popular literature of the region; texts like the *Khamisa* of Nizami and the *Shahnameh* were so widely read in the Deccan and the wider Indo-Persian world that I can reasonably assume that the authors the artifacts in question would have been familiar with them, and thus they are appropriate referents for my analysis of Buraq symbolism.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

South Asian history is an incredibly vast area that, to this day, is not sufficiently covered in English-language scholarship. The majority of English-language scholarship of South Asia focuses either on the Mughal era as a natural precursor to British rule, or otherwise on a timeless Hindu past. Additionally, much scholarship focuses overwhelmingly on the north of India or modern-day Pakistan, leaving the South of India aside. Even when the Deccan region, my area of study, is discussed, it is often conflated with the North, a problem starting ever since (arguably) the most important historian of South Asia, Firishta (d. 1627), was displaced from Bijapur to Delhi by a mistake in the first British translation of his work<sup>22</sup>. This displacement, ultimately, served British interests<sup>23</sup>. In this short introduction to the history of the Medieval Islamic Deccan in which my corpus was created, I hope to give context to the multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multicultural context of the South of India.

Whether we are discussing the Deccan<sup>24</sup> specifically or South Asia as a whole, there is no unproblematic history. The history of South Asia is incredibly politicized, with schools of history being divided up into the Muslim Perspective, the Hindu Nationalist Perspective, the Marxist perspective, and so forth<sup>25</sup>. History is always political, but it does not always fall into these neat political lines. Luckily, a number of contemporary scholars have embarked on the project of rewriting South Asian history in a way that recognizes its multicultural nature. Even with his colonial

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<sup>22</sup> In many historiographies of South Asia (including Asif's *Loss of Hindustan*), Firishta is recognized as the most important premodern historian of the subcontinent. However, Firishta is seldom recognized as hailing from the Deccan. In British translations of Firishta's work, he was misplaced to Delhi as a Mughal historian, even though he never lived under Mughal rule. Alexander Dow's translation of Firishta, the *History of Hindostan*, offered to the British King in 1768, places Firishta in Delhi, not for historical accuracy but to land him in a city that was incredibly important for the British at the time (Asif, *Hindustan* 190). Thus, Dow started a tradition in South Asian history writing that conflates North and South and identifies Islam in South Asia exclusively with the Mughals, ignoring the rest of South Asian Muslim history. Similarly, Henry Miers Elliot states in his *The History of India, as Told by Its Own Historians* that he hopes that his translations of Muslim histories would "make our native subjects more sensible of the immense advantages accruing to them under the mildness and equity of our (British) rule" (vol. I, xxii).

<sup>23</sup> The oversimplified, polarized view of history as local-Hindu versus foreign-Mughal-Muslim portrayed Islam as alien and oppressive. This allowed the British to celebrate their so-called just rule as non-discriminatory against local religious populations, as if they were freeing the Hindu population from oppressive Muslim rulers (Asif, *Hindustan* 185).

<sup>24</sup> Loosely corresponding to the plateau lying between three mountain ranges: the Western Ghats, the Eastern Ghats, and the Vindhya.

<sup>25</sup> As an example, see Salma Ahmed Farooqui's *Islam and the Mughal State* which divides its analysis into these categories.

biases, the British captain George F. Atkinson recognized the complexity of South Asia, reminding readers in his 1859 publication *Curry and Rice* that it was more accurate to view India as a continent than as a country; it is equal to or greater than Europe in its size and diversity, and thus is not analogous to a European nation (1-2). Given the complexity of the subcontinent, I cannot do justice to its history in this short piece of writing. Therefore, I point readers towards the many South Asian historians (and historians of South Asia) who are piecing together a more comprehensive South Asian history, among them Manu Pillai, Audrey Truschke, Richard Eaton, Manan Ahmed Asif, Ruby Lal, Romila Thapar, Ramachandra Guha, and others<sup>26</sup>.

South Asia<sup>27</sup> is often described as a clash of civilizations: Muslim, Hindu, Persian, Arab<sup>28</sup>. This vast region has never existed as a single state, but has instead been divided into kingdoms and empires with constantly fluctuating borders, each containing a myriad of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups that go far beyond Hindu and Muslim. Unfortunately, in many understandings of South Asian history, the subcontinent's past is oversimplified into a timeless Hindu era followed by the invasion by the foreign, Muslim Mughals<sup>29</sup>. This oversimplification sees the Mughal dynasties as

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<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, there is currently an imbalance in historical writing about India in which a significant amount of academically recognized scholars are either non-South Asians, or South Asians working and studying at European and North American institutions. However, this is not to say that the majority of work in South Asian history is necessarily happening outside the region – of course, there are plenty of scholars of South Asian history in South Asia, some working in the academy, but even more working outside of academia. History walks, historical fiction, popular history, and the like should all be taken seriously as the study of history. Manu Pillai, for example, published one of the most notable histories of the Deccan in recent times, *Rebel Sultans*, in 2018, without having completed a doctoral degree. *Rebel Sultans* was written for a popular, rather than academic, audience, as are many other significant works of South Asian history. Given the colonial history of scholarship of South Asia and the uneven power dynamics it created, I should also add that I myself am not South Asian. I am Muslim, and as a Muslim I am very interested in the whole of Muslim history, including that which occurred in South Asia. But, as a white person studying at a North American institution, I hope to at least do my best to pay deference to the work of South Asian scholars, whether they are affiliated with the academy or not.

<sup>27</sup> I would like to address the nomenclature I use in this thesis. “South Asia” may have been chosen as the politically correct term for this region, but it is not indigenous. The term “India” is also foreign, likely coming from Greek, and does not reflect the pre-partition connections between India and Pakistan. Manan Ahmed Asif uses the term “Hindustan,” which likely has Persian origins, but it is less recognized in the West. Despite its shortcomings, I personally choose to use “South Asia” as it reflects a geographic reality – it is, literally, in the South of Asia – and it is fairly current in academia as it does not imply an unnatural fissure between India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. At times I will refer to the region as “India,” given that this is the modern country that the region I am discussing currently belongs to, but it is only done as a matter of convenience.

<sup>28</sup> Manan Ahmed Asif discusses the creation of a clash-of-civilizations-type narrative with his analysis of stories of Muslim conquest in South Asia. He points out that the standard analysis of South Asian Muslim history “asserts that Islam is fundamentally Arabian and hence, geographically foreign to India,” furthermore, “this outsider origin of the faith makes its adherents outsiders as well. Muslims thus come from the outside to India: either as foreign conquerors or foreign traders or foreign proselytizers, all distinct from the “indigenous,” (Asif, *Conquests* 2).

<sup>29</sup> Amartya Sen describes the formation of this timeless Hindu era in the “harking back to ancient India” as the true heritage of India, in contrast to its later, Muslim-ruled periods (x).

representative of all Islam in South Asia, ignoring earlier Muslim dynasties such as the Delhi Sultanate<sup>30</sup>, as well as the non-Mughal Muslim dynasties of the Deccan.

The Mughals were formidable; however, they were not the only Muslim rulers in South Asia, nor were they the first. The Mughals were predated by the Delhi Sultanate, who were predated by other Arab and Persian conquerors, who were predated by Muslim traders<sup>31</sup>. We will never know when the first Muslim stepped onto subcontinent soil, but we can imagine that Muslim merchants likely travelled by naval route from the Arabian peninsula during the first centuries AH (after hijra). The Mughals, however, would not make a dent in the region until Babur's victory at the battle of Panipat in 1524. For a quick overview of Muslim dynasties in the Deccan, see the appendix.

The Delhi Sultanate (1206-1506 A.D.) was possibly the first significant Muslim dynasty in South Asia. At its height, it covered a vast area from Kashmir to the Carnatic. As it began its decline, it dissolved into multiple polities, one of these being the Bahmani Sultanate (1347-1527) that ruled from Gulbarga and Bidar<sup>32</sup>. This sultanate then broke up even more, leading to the rise of the Nizam Shahs (1490-1636) in Ahmadnagar, the Adil Shahs (1490-1686) in Bijapur, and the Qutb Shahs (1518-1687) in Hyderabad and Golconda, where the first Deccani Buraq painting is believed to have originated. All three of these dynasties were incredibly rich in art, architecture, and literature and were known for their rich cultures that combined the traditions of many religious and ethnic groups.

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<sup>30</sup> Samira Sheikh discusses the religious diversity of the Delhi Sultanate, stating that “far from stamping out religious diversity, sultanate rule in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries arguably opened up an unprecedented range of religious options, a veritable religious marketplace, as newly prosperous patrons sought legitimacy and divine assistance.”

(130)

<sup>31</sup> Eaton discusses the settlement of Muslim traders on the Western coasts from at least the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (*Sufis of Bijapur* 13-14).

<sup>32</sup> These multiple polities led to the creation of multiple “new regional cultures,” including the cultures of the Deccan that are the subject of this thesis (Behl, *Magic Doe* 185).



FIGURE 3 "INDIA IN THE TIME OF CLIVE & WARREN HASTINGS." PHILIPS' NEW HISTORICAL ATLAS FOR STUDENTS, 1917.



One of the most celebrated Deccan rulers was Ibrahim Adil Shah II (d. 1627) of Bijapur. Just as Emperor Akbar (d. 1605) was known for adopting various Hindu traditions into Mughal courtly culture, Adil Shah II was known for crafting a syncretic culture in the South (Eaton, *Bijapur* 89). This syncretism can be found in the cultural productions of the region, including the Dakhni Urdu literary texts *The Gulshan-I Ishq* (discussed later in this thesis) and Ibrahim's own work, the *Kitab-I Nauras (Book of Nine Essences)*. Despite being written by a Muslim author, the *Kitab-I Nauras (Book of Nine Essences)* glorifies Saraswati and the Hindu Elephant God, Ganesh, without seeing any conflict between Ibrahim's Muslim faith and his admiration of Hindu deities (Shah 81). Ibrahim began addresses with a salute to the goddess Saraswati, bringing local non-Muslim religious traditions to the fore in his Muslim court (Pillai, *Rebel Sultans* 131). Additionally, the Adil Shah tried to reconcile Sunni and Shia traditions. He had been both Sunni and Shia at different times, being born into Sunnism and converting to Shiism later in his reign. To this day, there are large Sunni and Shia communities in the Deccan, and many uniquely Deccani Shia traditions, such as Hyderabad's celebrations at Muharram, are celebrated by Sunnis and Shias alike<sup>33</sup>.

Sunnism and Shiism in Medieval<sup>34</sup> Southern India were often related to ethnicity. Known as "Westerners," Iranian immigrants and their descendants tended to be Shia, while those with ancestry in South Asia tended to be Sunni. There was a continuous "influx of elite Persianized migrants" that brought with them a "Persian cosmopolitan culture and its distinctive ethics, aesthetics, and political practices" that interacted with the "preexisting Sanskrit cosmopolis" (Burchett 70, Alam 118). Persian speakers emigrated to the Deccan in large numbers as painters or artists or holy men or soldiers or scribes. In numerous South Asian dynasties, including the Mughals, the Adil Shahs, the Delhi Sultanate, and more, Persian was the language of court<sup>35</sup>. By 1700, India arguably became "the

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<sup>33</sup> For a longer discussion of Shiism in the Deccan, turn to the work of Karen Ruffle. She discusses contemporary Shiism in Hyderabad in her book, *Gender, Sainthood, and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism*. For examples of South Asian Muharram celebrations, see the Youtube video "*Muslim*" *Big Festival Muharram of Indian Village*, and Sayeed's article "Muharram Celebrations in Northern Karnataka: A Festival of Harmony."

<sup>34</sup> The term "Medieval" to describe a period of Indian history has in some cases been seen as problematic. This era is often stretched much further in India than in Europe, sometimes going as late as 1857. However, scholars Elizabeth Lambourn and Vivek Gupta have used this designation despite its problems as it allows scholars of India to sit at the same table as those of Europe. Additionally, if the Medieval era is described by the feudal structure of organisation, it is appropriate to stretch it to a larger period than in Europe. Additionally, the study of Medieval India and the Islamic world as a whole is changed by the fact that either the Renaissance in these regions didn't happen or predated the European renaissance as scholars were interested in translating and rereading classical authors such as Plato well before this trend became current in Europe.

<sup>35</sup> South Asia long held close connections to Iran. For an illustration of this close relationship, see Kavita Singh's analysis of a painting of Mughal Emperor Jahangir embracing Shah Abbas in *Real Birds in Imagined Gardens* (58-63).

world's leading centre for the patronage of Persian literature and scholarship," with approximately seven times as many Persian-literate people in the subcontinent than in Iran (Eaton, *Persianate Age* 381). Persian vocabulary crept into vernacular languages, leaving their relics behind today through words that define South Asia, such as Hindu, Hindi, and Punjab, which all derive from Persian<sup>36</sup> (Eaton, *Persianate Age* 140). However, the evidence of a hybrid Indo-Persian culture does not mean that Indian-Persian relations were always amicable; rather, there was often a tension between native Deccanis and Westerners (immigrants and their descendants from Iran and Central Asia).

Beyond Sunni and Shia, Sufism was an important religious movement in the Deccan. Sufi leaders could be found all over India, and they connected with the populace through many avenues such as literature, music, and more. The reality of the Deccan, and South Asia in general, is that the borders have constantly been shifting (if there even were borders at all), political rule has continuously been changing, and the political reach of rulers was often diffuse. Because of fluctuating borders, it was important for rulers to harness the soft power of Sufi mystics in order to convince the masses of their legitimacy<sup>37</sup>. However, these rulers would have to be careful that local Sufi mystics would not become more powerful than themselves; therefore, it could be safer to patronize saints from outside the region instead of local saints. For this reason, many Deccan rulers imported a number of spiritual figures from Iran who helped give them soft power without creating competition between Sufis and rulers (Pillai 56). From village girl to emperor, the saints held a magnetic power that attracted people to their Sufi centres<sup>38</sup>. In the last chapter of my thesis, I will discuss Sufism in the Deccan in more detail and its relation to the Deccani Buraq paintings.

Another notable dynasty, the Qutb Shahs, found their seat about 350 kilometres from Bijapur in Hyderabad and Golconda (*Persianate Age* 154). At the turn of the Islamic millennium, Hyderabad was founded next to Golconda. Though Golconda is but a ruin today, Hyderabad is a

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<sup>36</sup> As India goes through a self-conscious project of de-Persianisation, changing the names of cities such as Allahabad and Faizabad to names with Sanskrit origins, there lies the irony that this movement's champion, Amit Shah, is himself named with a Persian word (shah). See Shoail Danial's article for more information.

<sup>37</sup> Eaton describes how Sufi sheikhs in the Deccan would often name a successor by "*predicting*" who would succeed the throne as a "veiled form of royal appointment" (*Social History* 45). Similarly, the state could also support Sufi institutions, Shaykh Burhan al-Din's lodge sought "donations and eventually land endowments" after the death of Burhan al-Din's successor left them without a single leading teacher or sheikh (Ernst and Lawrence 21).

<sup>38</sup> To see how Sufi communities stretched beyond religious boundaries, find Richard M. Eaton's article "Sufi Folk Literature and the Expansion of Indian Islam" where discusses a particular case of rural women of various religious backgrounds interacting with Sufi centres through song. I discuss this example in my blog entry titled "Spinning to the Tune of Sufi Thought." Even today, shrines and dargahs continue to be visited regularly, whether for tourism, spiritual upliftment, or even healing of medical ailments (Valdinoci 491).

vibrant city of almost 10 million inhabitants in its metropolitan area. Like Bijapur, this region was multi-ethnic and multi-religious, with its government relying mainly on recruits from four main groups: Deccanis, Westerners (often meaning Iranians or Afghans), Nayakwari warriors, and Niyogi Brahmins (Eaton *Persianate Age* 155, Haidar *A History* 10, Welch 121). It was known worldwide for its diamonds and may have been the place of origin of the famed Koh-i-noor<sup>39</sup>. The Golconda Fort, where the Qutb Shahs were based, was known for its extreme opulence, housing arguably more riches than any Mughal city. This enormous wealth enabled artistic patronage to flourish.

The artifacts of my corpus were painted during the period that Richard M. Eaton classifies as an “artistic florescence,” from 1565 to the 1680’s when the Mughals conquered most of the Deccan (*Persianate Age* 154). The Deccan was separated from North India by the Vindhya mountain range, acting as a natural barrier that gave no end of grief to the imperialist Mughal rulers. The Mughals’ desire to conquer the Deccan is exemplified by a painting of the Mughal emperor Jahangir (d. 1627)<sup>40</sup> where he fantasizes of an assassination that he was never able to accomplish; the image shows the emperor shooting at the disincorporated head of Malik Ambar of Ahmedabad (d. 1626), a Habshi slave who became one of the most formidable Deccan rulers. The Mughals would not successfully capture the region until the reign of Aurangzeb (d. 1707)<sup>41</sup>. Under Aurangzeb’s rule, relatively small kingdoms and city-states were absorbed into a massive South Asian empire. However, despite the Northern takeover, the Deccan was politically independent from 1724 until British rule.

After the reign of Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire lost its stability. Two kingmakers known as the Sayyid brothers toppled and replaced as many as seven emperors from 1707 to 1722, some of whom reigned for as little as three months before being killed and replaced. In this unstable environment, there was less and less centralized control of the empire. Over time, many local rulers fell into debt, creating a situation that opportunistic British merchants could easily exploit. The British East India Company, seen as a small, insignificant player in world commerce before its encroachment into the subcontinent, bought out the fragmented Mughal empire piece by piece<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> Diamonds and other goods were part of what attracted the British to India as trade in South Asia began to be seen as a “short cut to great wealth” (Frankopan 270).

<sup>40</sup> Image not included for copyright reasons.

<sup>41</sup> For a history of the life of Aurangzeb, see Truschke *The Life and Legacy of India's Most Controversial King*.

<sup>42</sup> For more information, see Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*.

The Deccan slowly fell into the British merchants' trap, and was eventually annexed into British India.

Nevertheless, Hyderabad State still enjoyed relative independence under the Nizams from 1724 on. The unique status of Hyderabad continued after India gained independence from the British. During partition, Hyderabad chose neither to join India nor Pakistan, but instead to rule as an independent country, landlocked, and surrounded by India on all sides. Not surprisingly, this did not last long, and after only one year, Hyderabad was annexed by India on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1948. After 1948, the Nizams slowly dwindled in importance, losing their political importance if not their wealth. However, they maintain a strong presence in the city, as evidenced by the Salar Jung Museum (opened 1951), an institution that to this day has one of the largest collections of Islamic art in the world and is owned by the Salar Jung branch of the Nizam's family.

While I classify my study as one focusing on Islamic Art as my corpus relates specifically to Islam<sup>43</sup>, I want to emphasize that one often cannot draw a natural distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures in South Asia<sup>44</sup>. Manan Ahmed Asif argues in his historiographical work, *The Loss of Hindustan*, that for medieval South Asians, "not one community, nor people" are understood in "terms of their "otherness," as exemplified in the work of the medieval historian Firishta (d. 1620), who does not "remark that one faith supersedes another" (Asif, *Hindustan* 144). In the *Kitab-I Nauras*, Ibrahim Adil emphasizes this idea with a short poem:

There are different languages;  
But there is one emotional appeal.

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<sup>43</sup> This does not mean that there are no Hindu influences in Buraq imagery. Even though connections to Hinduism in Buraq imagery are beyond the scope of my thesis, they are a fruitful avenue for further study.

<sup>44</sup> Although many people in South Asia may define their identities in terms of their religion, there is a shared culture that often blurs the lines between religious groups. Even under Muslim rulership, there were plenty of Hindu people, such as the many Hindu wives of Mughal Emperors, in court. South Asian traditions stem from Hindu, Muslim, and other religious contexts, including but not limited to countless examples such as Emperor Akbar's practice of "viewing" of the emperor, which is similar to the Hindu practice of Darshan. There are so many links between communities, such as food, celebrations, language, and more, that belong to South Asians as a whole rather than to one particular community; therefore, they cannot be divided into "Muslim" or "Hindu" practices. (For examples of the mixing of Hindu and Muslim festivals, see the mixing of Muharram with Holi traditions in Visuvalingam 40 and the celebration of Vasantotsava in a Hindu-Muslim context in John Guy 162-175). Furthermore, the categories of "Hindu" and "Muslim" have not always been the primary identifiers for different communities. Ethnicity, caste, and other denominators have often been just as important identifiers as religion; for example, Eknath (the 16<sup>th</sup> century poet and mystic) wrote the *Hindu-Turk Samvad*, not the *Hindu-Muslim Samvad*, because ethnicity was the primary identifier at this time rather than religion. Differing political contexts have sometimes solidified differences between Hindus and Muslims that may have not existed previously; as a scholar, I must be careful that I do not impose modern identity politics on historical communities.

Be he a Brahmin or a Turk,  
He is only fortunate on whom  
The Goddess of Learning (Saraswati) smiles.  
O Ibrahim, the world only seeks knowledge.  
Serve meditate upon with steadfast heart,  
The power of words.  
( qtd. in Eaton, Bijapur 99 and Pillai, Rebel Sultans 132)

I hope that this short introduction sets the stage for seeking knowledge in the art, literature,  
and religion of Deccan India.

## PRELIMINARY IMAGE ANALYSIS

As part of the 3-step method of iconology, I will begin with the Preiconographic Description (Panofsky, *Studies* 28). The preiconographic description will be done with tables that detail the animals present in each composite image of the two Buraq artifacts of my corpus. By comparing and contrasting these elements, I can help identify the most fruitful areas of discussion, and thus determine avenues for research that highlight the Buraq's place in the artistic traditions of the Deccan region of India.



C. 1660-1680, Deccan, probably Golconda

**Table 1. Figural Elements: The Golden Buraq, Golconda 1660-1680**

Location on Body	Animal or Decorative Element	Notes
Head	Crown	
	Human Female	Only part of the Buraq that uses full colour
Neck	Birds	
Body	Young deer	
	Tiger or big cat	
	Rabbit	
	Elephant	
	Bird	
Legs	Dogs	
	Fish	
Feet	Canine head	
Toes	Small birds	
Tail	Serpentine Head	
Decoration	Flame-like, vegetal-like protrusions around neck	
Background	Realistic florals	

Notes: Monochromatic gold and green body with human head in full colour.

Discussion:

This is the first of the two Buraq images. It is one of the earliest examples of a composite animal tradition in South Asian art (see storymap for examples). In this image, a monochromatic palette brings the many animals within the body into a cohesive whole. The only part of the image done in full colour is the head, suggesting that there is particular importance to the feminine figure of this image.

2. BURQA IN FULL COLOUR: HYDERABAD 1770-1780



C. 1770-1780 Hyderabad



**Table 2. Figural Elements: The Buraq in Full Colour, Hyderabad c. 1770-1780**

Location on Body	Animal or Decorative Element	Notes
Head	Crown	Harpies, or human-female-headed birds are present on crown.
	Human Female	
Neck	Birds	
Body	Young deer	
	Tiger or big cat	One big cat is biting into a young deer, with blood spilling out
	Rabbit	
	Elephant	
	Mouse	
	Human Woman	Wearing white, cradled near the front of the animals chest, wearing a head covering.
Legs	Dogs	
	Fish	
Feet	Ferocious bird	Hind only
Toes	Small eels or serpents	
Tail	Serpentine Head	Head has a protruding, flaming tongue that is biting the tail of a big cat who comes out of the Buraq's body
Decoration	Flame-like protrusions around neck	
Background	Green with grass detailing	

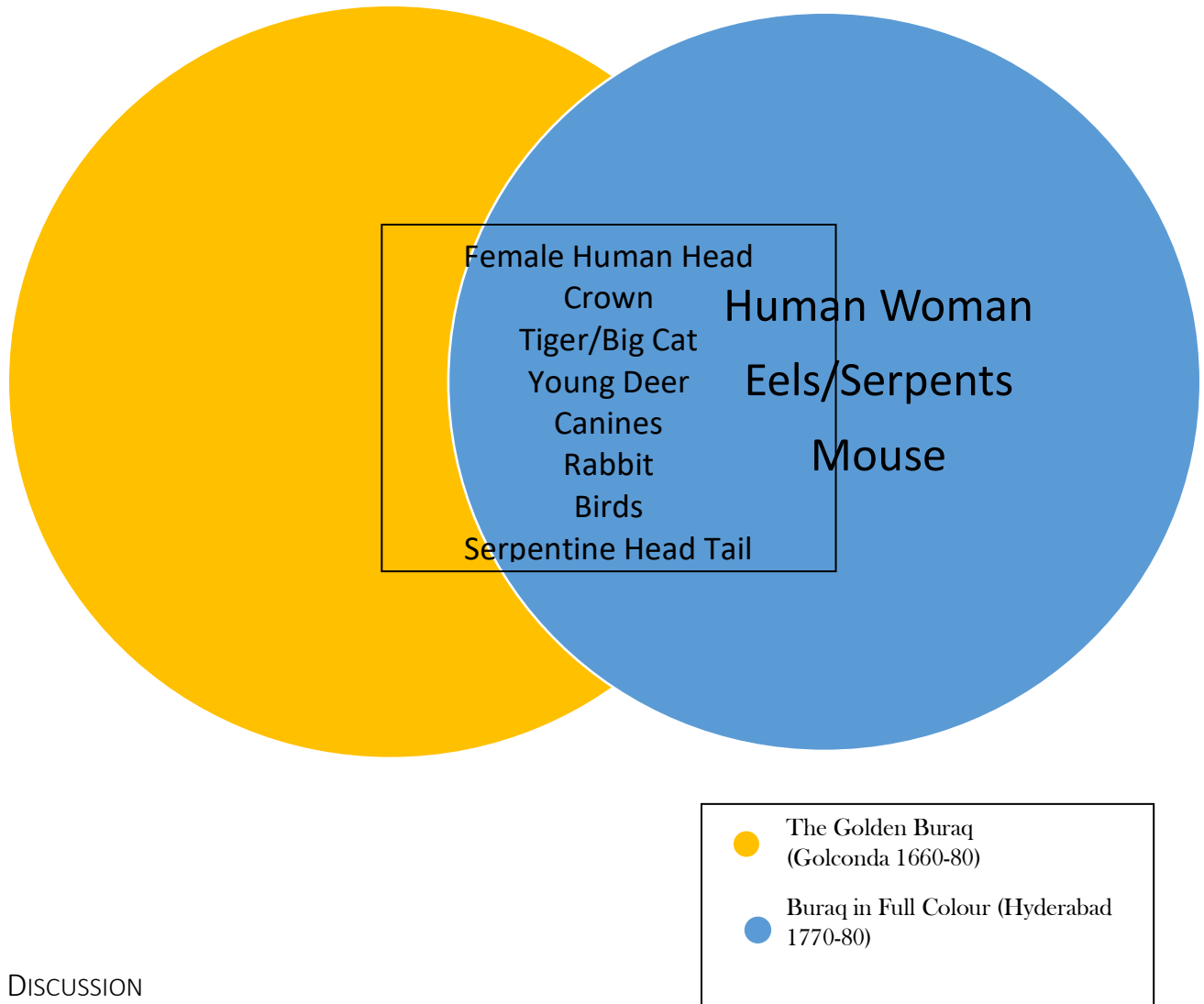
Notes: Full colour. Set in a floral frame.

Discussion:

This image appears to be a near-copy of the previous image. Many of the animals are the same, but the style of the composition, and, most notably, the colour, differs significantly. While this image may fit into contemporary styles, it is clearly a continuation of an artistic tradition established in the previous century.

The female figure near the breast is a new addition from the previous painting. It may depict a *dai* or milkmaid, “an important Sufi symbol of an interlocutor” found in Deccani stories, such as the *Gulshan-i Ishq* that is discussed later in this thesis (Haidar, *Gulshan* 307). While I will not discuss this particular symbol at length, it hints at a Sufi connection that is worth exploring. For more details, see the following chapters of this thesis.

COMMON ELEMENTS



DISCUSSION

As the animal-head tail appears to be unique to the Deccan region, I will begin by analysing the tail element through comparisons to similar images and the use of dragon imagery in literary works. After establishing possible interpretations of the tail, I will then move on to analysing the animal composition as a whole in reference to its historical, spiritual, and literary context.

## THE DRAGON IN THE BURAQ



FIGURE 4 MOHAMMADINEZHAD, KOUROSH. THE BATTLE OF THE MAN AND TWO DRAGONS. 2019. PERSIAN MINIATURE PAINTING BY CONTEMPORARY ARTIST. COPY OF THE 1676 PAINTING BY MU'IN MUSAVVIR, BRITISH MUSEUM, [HTTPS://WWW.BRITISHMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/OBJECT/W\\_1949-0709-0-11](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1949-0709-0-11). USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE ARTIST.

THE COPYING OF THIS PAINTING AS RECENTLY AS 2019 SHOWS THE CONTINUING IMPORTANCE OF DRAGON MOTIFS IN IRANIAN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES.

In my last section, I analyzed the composition of two paintings by breaking down the long list of animals that make up their composite images. Of the animals in the images, the most notable is the dragon's-head tail: this element is present in both paintings, and does not seem to exist in Buraq depictions from any region outside the Deccan.<sup>45</sup> As the two paintings are copies of each other, I will analyse them together, starting with an inquiry into dragon symbolism in an Islamic South Asian context. When we look at the Buraq in Hadith, it seems like an uncomplicated animal primarily dedicated to serving the Prophet. Most depictions show the Buraq with the Prophet mounted atop, ready to carry him on his journey; only in very few cases is the Buraq shown on its own. However, the depictions of the Buraq I will be discussing here, as outlined in the Corpus section of this thesis, bear little resemblance to the more standard Indo-Persian style. There is no rider atop the Buraq, and the paintings do not conform to the traditions of Buraq paintings shown in the story map provided earlier in this thesis.<sup>46</sup> The many animals woven into the Buraq paintings create a harmonious composition, and yet, there is an unmistakable sense of violence, particularly in the case of the dragon who bites into the tail of a lion, who, in turn, bites into the body of a faun. The representation of animals living in harmony is congruent with the depiction of a holy animal; however, the violence is much more difficult to reconcile. Why would there be violence in the body of an animal that is supposed to be in total submission to God and service to his Prophet? The mythical dragon is known to inspire fear and suffering in both human beings and non-human animals and is almost synonymous with violence in Europe and Central Asia.

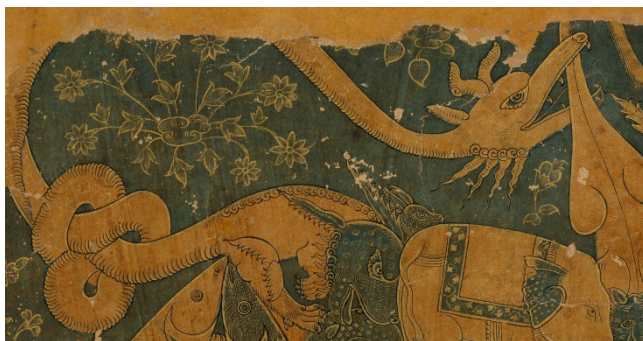


FIGURE 6 DETAIL, THE FABULOUS CREATURE BURQA. GOLCONDA 1660-1680.



FIGURE 5 DETAIL, AL-BURQA. HYDERABAD 1770-1780.

<sup>45</sup> While I was at first unclear as to the identity of the head on the tail, it is clear from a comparison to images in other Indo-Persian paintings that this animal is in fact a dragon. See *Mohan's Horse*, for example. This horse has dragon heads that look near-identical to those in the Buraq paintings.

<sup>46</sup> See my story map at <https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/ccf097a0b5ed84fa59e3fe6f3bf7e03e/voyage-of-the-buraq/index.htm>.



FIGURE 7 BIHZAD. MOHAN'S HORSE TURNS INTO A DRAGON. C. 1943 HERAT, FROM A KHAMSA OF NIZAMI. BRITISH LIBRARY, [HTTPS://BLOGS.BL.UK/ASIAN-AND-AFRICAN/2014/07/A-KHAMSAH-ASCRIBED-TO-THE-PAINTER-BIHZAD-ADD-25900.HTML](https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2014/07/a-khamsah-ascribed-to-the-painter-bihzad-add-25900.html).

Furthermore, the mythical nature of this animal sets it apart from the others in the composition who are “real” or natural animals<sup>47</sup>. Animals were a common subject in Persianate and South Asian art, such as in hunting scenes, or stories like *Kalila wa Dimna*. However, these narratives seldom included dragons. Then, why is it included here? The inclusion of the dragon in the Buraq paintings suggests that these ferocious animals are not simply decorative elements inspired by the artist’s everyday life. Perhaps the fantastical Buraq compositions are connected to stories from folklore, poetry, or epic literature; therefore, I look to stories known in the Islamic Deccan to uncover possible meanings of dragon imagery.

It is generally understood that dragons came into Persian literature and painting through Chinese influence; as trade brought textiles and ceramics from China with dragon motifs, it also brought a new creature into the Persian imagination (Rosenzweig 150, Titley 3). However, as these dragons entered Persian literature, they drifted from the Chinese image of dragons as wise sages and protectors to transform into frightening creatures like those we now see in European fairy tales, folk tales, and literature (Nickel 139)<sup>48</sup>. Dragons in Persianate art appear in three primary forms: sea monsters, giant serpents with legs, or disembodied heads with long necks, the latter of which is the case with the paintings in question. These disembodied dragons are often included as elements on composite animals, as is the case with Mohan’s Horse and the Elephant Clock design (see figures 7 and 8). Beyond manuscript paintings, dragons were very common in material culture as decorations (Titley 35). Rosenzweig describes dragons as “essential participants in several scenes of heroism in Persian legends” (161). Dragons, as “evil” beings, were “differentiated from the Good” as a contrast between peaceful and violent animals (ibid.). Dragons in literature or art could be used both literally and metaphorically; they are strong and ferocious creatures, whether that strength is viewed in a positive or negative sense (Davis 188).

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<sup>47</sup> While it may not be appropriate to create a clear dichotomy between real and mythical animals in a historical context, it is clear that there was some distinction between mythical and “real” animals. Badauni, a historian from the time of Akbar complains about the fanciful nature of works like the *Ramayana*, *Hamzelnâme*, and *Shahnameh*: “Hence it is evident,” he says, “that these events are not true at all, and are nothing but pure invention, and simple imagination, like the *Shahnameh*, and the stories of Amir Hamzah, or else it must have happened in the time of the dominion of the beasts and the jinns - but God alone knows the truth of the matter” (Seyller, *Adventures* 31).

<sup>48</sup> Chinese Buddhism also incorporated dragons into their traditions, but in concert with other Chinese ideals of dragons, they are seen in a positive light as embodiments of enlightenment. Furthermore, there are also examples of dragons in Hindu scriptures, such as Vritra, a dragon who stops the waterways. The god Indra slays Vritra in order for the water to begin to flow. Even though I do not discuss the Hindu connections to dragons in this thesis, it is a fruitful area for future study.

In order to understand the semiotics of dragons in the medieval Deccan, I will be looking to literature popular from the time the Buraq paintings were made<sup>49</sup>. I will look at both the *Shahnameh* and the *Khamasa* of Nizami as these two works would have been the two most sought-after books by collectors of any well-stocked library throughout the Persianate world (Titley 13), as well as the *Hamzehnameh*<sup>50</sup>, a Persian oral tale that was often recited in South Asia and finally written down during the reign of Akbar (1556-1605)<sup>51</sup>. I hope that through this chapter, I can understand why the demonic and violent dragon would be included in a composite image of the pure and sacred Buraq.

Perceptions of dragons in Iran and Central Asia do not differ significantly from those in Europe; dragons are formidable monsters and fierce adversaries of princes and kings. However, as fearsome as they are, they are not invincible; these giant monsters could face their end at the tip of a hero's sword. As Ferdowsi writes in the *Shahnameh*, "even lions that terrify the world, and dragons, cannot escape the snare of fate" (Davis 73)<sup>52</sup>. That snare could just be the comparatively weak animals, human beings, who despite their lack of size, sharp teeth, or fire-breath, could use their ingenuity to defeat the dragon.

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<sup>49</sup> Throughout my thesis, I look at both Persian and Indian literatures since these literary cultures overlapped considerably in the Deccan, particularly in the 'Adil Shahi and Qutb Shahi courts (Sharma, *Forging* 401).

<sup>50</sup> Akbar's commission of this text is particularly celebrated for its contributions to visual art. This manuscript is so heavily illustrated that it is often compared to a comic; this is not surprising given that Akbar was illiterate. Today, this text continues to be celebrated, as evidenced by the 2020 "Hamzanama Comic Contest".

<sup>51</sup> Though some scholars may refrain from characterising these stories, set in a pre-Islamic era, as specifically "Islamic," I would argue that they do in fact have a solid connection to Islamic thought. Many of these texts mention God, and given that the authors were Muslim, there is no reason to assume that the pre-Islamic conception of God they refer to would differ from an Islamic conception of God. For example, in Persian language, the same name for God, *Khuda*, could be used in both Islamic and pre-Islamic contexts. The ideal human before and after Islam does not necessarily change in a Persianate context. Nizami combined pre-Islamic stories and pre-Islamic morality with Islamic philosophy to create stories that served as both entertainment and allegories for religious practice (Minuchehr 115). I will discuss Nizami's allegories further in the following chapter as I assess the religious underpinnings of three Persianate and South Asian romances.

<sup>52</sup> This citation is taken from Dick Davis' translation of the *Shahnameh*; as this is an abridged translation and may have significant differences from the original text, I cite Davis rather than Ferdowsi to acknowledge the translator's part in the text.





FIGURE 8 BAHRAM GUR KILLING THE DRAGON. 1610 MUGHAL INDIA, FROM THE KHAMSA BY NIZAMI GANJAVI. BRITISH MUSEUM, [HTTPS://WWW.BRITISHMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/OBJECT/W\\_1927-0413-0-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1927-0413-0-1).

In *Haft Paykar*, the slaying of a dragon is used to prove the masculine virtue of its hero, Bahram Gur. Bahram's slaying of a dragon "with his bare hands" is proof of his bravery and is thus described at the beginning of the story to paint a positive picture of his personality: "He excelled at the hunt; whenever he drew his bow, the arrow flew directly to its mark, and it was said that with his bare hands he had killed a dragon" (Chelkowski 91). In the *Shahnameh*, however, dragon-slaying does more than just prove the hero's bravery, but also highlights his religiosity<sup>53</sup>. Salm, the eldest son of Feridun, slays a dragon not only to boost his own ego, but to protect the people that the dragon had been terrorising. This slaying can only be done with the help of God. "When I saw that no one dared oppose it," Salm wrote to a friend, "I emptied my heart of fear and bound on my sword in God's name" (Davis 140). Even in killing, Salm completes a moral action. Furthermore, Salm's emptying "his heart of fear" recalls how the Prophet had his heart "emptied" on the night of Isra and Mi'raj (Davis 140). Before the Prophet could proceed on his night journey, his heart was removed from his chest and cleansed before being filled with belief (Hadith

<sup>53</sup> The *Shahnameh*'s stories were not only for entertainment, but also had significant didactic value. The *Shahnameh* has been called a "mirror for princes," a genre that outlines good behaviour for high class Persian men (Darling 1, 8).

227). In both cases, the “emptying” of the heart of Feridun and the “cleansing” of the Prophet’s heart, any barriers to correct action were removed; this amounts to a cleansing of the ego (or nafs) and a perfection of character that allows them to defy humanly limitations (Davis 140 and Hadith 120)<sup>54</sup>. Salm’s purifying of his heart sounds very similar to the purification described by Muslim mystics, such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali<sup>55</sup>. The necessity of a pure heart to fulfill a quest in Persian literature certainly strikes a chord with Islamic theology; the purity of the heart is discussed extensively in Ferdowsi’s text as he uses the dragon episode to bridge pre-Islamic<sup>56</sup> ethics from the stories of the *Shahnameh* with the Islamic ethics of his time to create a model of the good Muslim man.

Ferdowsi’s most prolific hero, Rostam, also slays a dragon<sup>57</sup>. When king Kay Kavus and his kingdom are in danger, Rostam is sent to help. On his way, riding through the wilderness on his beloved steed, Rakhsh<sup>58</sup>, he comes across a dragon:

A dragon, from which no elephant had ever escaped, appeared on the plain. Its lair was nearby, and even demons were afraid to cross its path. As it approached it saw Rostam asleep and Rakhsh standing awake, alert as a lion. He wondered what had lain down here in his sleeping place, because nothing ever came this way, neither demons nor elephants nor lions; and if anything did come, it didn’t escape this dragon’s teeth and claws. (Davis 206)

In this passage, the dragon completely decimated the forest, ridding it of elephants, lions (both of which appear in the Buraq paintings), and all living things. Just like Salm, Rostam’s strength is not enough to save the forest; Rostam must prove his valour with his virtuous nature. In order to defeat the dragon, Rostam relies on the help of both his horse and God. Rakhsh bit the

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<sup>54</sup> Saeed connects the purification of the nafs to Quranic narrations, referring to two Qur’anic passages: “He who purifies it (nafs) succeeds” [91,9] and “Except Him (who will be saved) who brings to Allah a sound and pure heart” [26,89] (75).

<sup>55</sup> See Ghazali’s *Marvels of the Heart* for more information.

<sup>56</sup> The entirety of the *Shahnameh* takes place in the pre-Islamic period.

<sup>57</sup> Though the *Shahnameh* describes many different kingdoms and characters, Rostam lives far beyond the usual allotment for human beings, finding his way into the story multiple times as a *deus ex machina*.

<sup>58</sup> This horse, Rakhsh, though only an ungulate, was described in a similar way to a dragon: “Rakhsh seemed to be a magical creature, swift in battle, with large haunches, alert and foaming at the mouth” (Davis 185). Its ferociousness and magic seem more typical of a dragon than a steed. Though Rakhsh was kind to his owner, he would have been terrifying to an enemy with his outstanding capabilities, and so it is only with this dragon-like creature that the hero can slay another dragon.

dragon's shoulder, pacifying him just enough for Rostam to cut off the dragon's head (Brend and Melville 110).



FIGURE 9 RAKSH HELPS ROSTAM DEFEAT A DRAGON. C. 1450, FROM FIRDAWSI, SHAHNAMEH. BRITISH LIBRARY, [HTTPS://WWW.BL.UK/LEARNING/CULT/INSIDE/GALLERY/DRAGON/DRAGON.HTML](https://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/inside/gallery/dragon/dragon.html).

The ground beneath its body disappeared beneath a stream of blood, and Rostam gave a great sigh when he looked at the dragon, and saw that all the dark desert flowed with blood and poison. He was afraid, and stared in horror, murmuring the name of God over and over again. He went into the stream and washed his body and head, acknowledging God's authority over the world. He said, "Great God, you have given me strength and intelligence and skill, so that before me demons, lions and elephants, waterless deserts and great rivers like the Nile, are as nothing in my eyes. But enemies are many and the years are few. (Davis 207)

Rostam's reliance on God in his act of valour is again similar to accounts of the Prophet's life. The Qur'an describes the Prophet's victory at the Battle of Badr as an act of God:

And you did not kill them, but it was Allah who killed them. And you threw not, [O Muhammad], when you threw, but it was Allah who threw that He might test the believers with a good test. Indeed, Allah is Hearing and Knowing. (Qur'an 8:17, Sahih International Translation)

Success in battle, both in the context of the Battle of Badr and Rostam's slaying of the dragon, is applauded not only as an act of bravery but one of piety. The humility of the hero, instead of debasing him, lifts him to a higher standard of virtue. Dragon slaying tales, in many cases, become part of a spiritual landscape, regardless of their religious background<sup>59</sup>. The slaying of a dragon is not only part of character development in the story, but also brings to light a larger set of moral values, such as humility and trust in God.

The dragons of Persian literature were also present in the literature of South Asia, Persian-language or otherwise. While the *Hamzehnameh* may have initially been told in Persian, it took on a new life in South Asian languages and culture<sup>60</sup>. Dragons appear in the *Hamzehnameh* numerous times, both as terrestrial dragons and aquatic leviathans (Seyller, *Adventures* 85, 98, 252). Umar, a relative of the Prophet, underwent various quests on his mission to spread Islam. In one instance, Umar comes across a dragon when he was on his way to deliver a letter to the ruler Qitanush asking him to surrender and convert to Islam. Like many heroes of Persianate lore, Umar must pass through a forest before accomplishing his goal. This forest is a "hellish environment" where all the trees are dying from a fiery dragon's breath. When he finds the dragon, he tries to slay him in a long and difficult battle. Towards the end of the battle, Umar throws a bottle of naphtha at the dragon, causing the fire-breathing creature to go up in flames (*Adventures of Hamza* 252). Hamza's winning move reveals the irony of the dragon's fire; the same fire that gives the dragon its power over human beings became his downfall when the naphtha caused the dragon to perish by his own flame.

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<sup>59</sup> Saint George is an important Christian example of a dragon slayer being celebrated in religious practice.

<sup>60</sup> Professional storytellers migrated from Iran to various Indian courts, bringing famous tales like the *Hamzehnameh* (P. Khan, *Broken Spell* 89). This story did not stop with Persian speakers, however, and the *Hamzehnameh* gained new life in local tongues, including Urdu. Though this story was primarily transmitted orally, for my study I will pull from a famous manuscript of the text commissioned by the emperor Akbar (d. 1605) and discussed in the work of John Seyller<sup>60</sup>. For a full translation of the text, see Ghaliib Lakhnavi et al. *The Adventures of Amir Hamza*.



FIGURE 10 DASWANTH. UMAR SLAYS THE DRAGON. C. 1567-72, FROM THE HAMZESHNAMEH, COMMISSIONED BY EMPEROR AKBAR. AUSTRIAN MUSEUM OF APPLIED ARTS.

The dragon's self-destructive violence contrasts with Umar's cleverness. The dragon's fire and anger become its own undoing, much in the way that anger can become the undoing of a human being. This passage accomplishes two goals in Umar's story: firstly, Umar proves his heroism through his defeat of the dragon, and secondly, he eliminates an opponent that could stop him on his path to spreading Islam. John Seyller emphasizes that "the triumph of Islam is a leitmotif of the Hamza legend" (*Adventures of Hamza* 89). The text contains numerous battles against idolaters that, in most cases, lead either to the idolaters' death or their conversion<sup>61</sup>. "In Islamic culture," John Seyller states, "few encounters become the stuff of legend more readily than the battle of a solitary hero against a dragon" (*Adventures* 252).

In Persian epic literature, as outlined in my analysis of the *Shahnameh*, *Hamzehnameh*, and *Haft Paykar*, dragons are an external enemy to be slaughtered. However, why would they be used in a depiction of the Buraq, a spiritual animal that has no apparent connection to epic literature? These stories may have had great entertainment value, but they were also extremely didactic. I suggest that the dragon of the Buraq paintings symbolizes an enemy that is not external to oneself; as common parlance would advise to "slay your demons," similarly, the dragons of epic literature may be interpreted as personal demons. In the hagiography of Safi al-din Ishaq Ardabili (d. 1334 Iran), Sufi sheikh and founder of the Safavid Sufi order, the description of dragons as "personal demons" is made explicit.

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<sup>61</sup> Additionally, like the Prophet and his Buraq, Hamza also has his own magical steed. This steed, Ashqar, is "no ordinary horse," identifiable by his "crimson colouring" and "magical third eye" (*Adventures of Hamza* 109). This steed accompanies Hamza as he fights in the way of Islam. The horse accompanies Hamza with a similar devotion as the Buraq had for the Prophet. This parallel with the Prophet's night journey, combined with the dragon symbolism that echoes the dragon's tail in the Buraq paintings, show that the *Hamzehnameh* is a good candidate for a hypotext of the Deccani Buraq paintings. For more information on hypotexts, see Pasha M. Khan, *Broken Spell* 93 and Genette 5.



FIGURE 11 SHEIKH ZAHID SAVING SUKRAHEH (RED) FAQIH FROM THE “DRAGON OF THE MIND.” 1582 SHIRAZ, FROM THE SAFVAT AL-SAFA BY ISMA'IL BIN BAZZAZ. AGA KHAN MUSEUM, [HTTPS://AGAKHANMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/ARTIFACT/SHAYKH-ZAHID-SAVING-SORHE-RED-FAQIH-FROM-THE-DRAGON-OF-THE-MIND-AKM264-FOL76V](https://agakhanmuseum.org/collection/artifact/shaykh-zahid-saving-sorhe-red-faqih-from-the-dragon-of-the-mind-akm264-fol76v).

In a passage of the *Safvat as-Safa*<sup>62</sup>, it is told that a scholar named Surkheh stayed with the community of Sheikh Zahid, an ancestor of Ardabili. Surkheh had heard of many miracles attributed to Sheikh Zahid, though he was skeptical of their veracity. However, despite his distrust in the accounts, he wanted to see for himself whether the sheikh actually held a superior spiritual power. And so, he decided to stay amongst Sheikh Zahid's community. Sufi communities welcomed visitors, giving food, drink, and shelter to anyone who arrived at their doorstep. Accordingly, Surkheh was given a cell to meditate and sleep in. One day, when he was secluded in his cell, the wall collapsed and left a gaping hole just large enough for a small dragon to come through. As the dragon burst into the room, it opened its mouth wide to attack Surkheh. Terrified, the poor man collapsed in fear, and Sheikh Zahid came to revive him. Once Surkheh woke, he told the Sheikh of the strange encounter. There was no dragon, the sheikh explains, but rather, a fixture of Surkheh's imagination<sup>63</sup>. Surkheh must "fight with his dragons or take them to his grave, he said" (Erkmen 49). The hungry dragon is a symbol of Surkheh's ego:<sup>64</sup> the ego that caused him to doubt in the Sheikh and his miracles. The dragon embodies Surkheh's inner demons; to progress on the Sufi path, he must conquer these demons to reach the next station of his spiritual journey. This image of the dragon as a personal demon is also shown in art: in the image of Sagittarius shown below, the dragon tail is part of the human zodiac<sup>65</sup>. Sagittarius shoots his dragon's-head tail in a war against himself<sup>66</sup>. He uses his bow to destroy a demonic part of himself rather than killing a foreign body.

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<sup>62</sup> The following description is based on Erkmen's study of the Aka Khan Museum Safvat as-Safa manuscript.

<sup>63</sup> It should not be assumed that because it was only a dream that the dragon was somehow trivial; dream interpretation was taken very seriously throughout Muslim history, and it was studied as a science. See Elias' chapter "Dreams, Visions and Imagination" for more information on the interpretation and dreams and visions in Muslim contexts (Aisha's Cushion 198-215).

<sup>64</sup> The word "*nafs*" in Arabic, literally meaning the "self," is often translated as the "ego." The word "nafs", like the "ego", has a mix of positive and negative connotations that, though not identical, are very closely comparable.

<sup>65</sup> The note on the 1660-1680 Buraq composite animal in *L'étrange et le merveilleux en terres d'islam* associates the Buraq with Sagittarius because of the appearance of its tail (Bernus-Taylor 289). Connections between Buraq iconography and astrology could be an area for future study.

<sup>66</sup> While astrology may seem tangential to Islamic thought, in reality it was a science much practiced among learned Muslims of the day.





FIGURE 12 SAGITTARIUS. HERAT, FROM THE AJA'IB AL-MAKHLUQAT OF QAZVINI. TAKEN FROM TITLEY, DRAGONS IN PERSIAN, MUGHAL AND TURKISH ART.

In most Sufi tariqas or orders, someone who wished to be formally initiated would have to go through a long process in which they place their complete trust in a Sufi Sheikh who advises them on the steps of their spiritual journey. As I will describe later, the goal of this journey is to develop a stronger relationship with God. In the same way that the heroes in the previous stories had to trust in God to progress on their journeys, a Sufi initiate must place their trust in God as well to progress along theirs. Aided by their Sufi Sheikh, a Sufi disciple, like the Persian epic hero, will be cleansed of fear and brought into a state of perfection<sup>67</sup>. When a person is in complete worship and love of God, they are instilled with bravery that helps them overcome their anxieties (Erkmen 65).

While we do not know if Sheikh Ardabili was known in the Deccan, the passage in the *Safvat as-Safa* shows that idea of dragons as an embodied metaphor for inner demons was floating around in the Islamic world. Using this text in conjunction with visual clues like the image of Saggiarius, we can imagine the dragon as a demonic part of the human soul<sup>68</sup>. The dragon's head on Saggiarius' tale is visually similar to the dragon tail of the Buraq paintings and reinforces the idea of the Buraq's tail as an inner demon. Firstly, the Buraq is a spiritual animal and thus favours a spiritual

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<sup>67</sup> For many Sufi devotees, they strive to approach the state of the *Perfect Human*, or *Insan al-Kamil*. While, traditionally, the *Perfect Human* is Muhammad, many Sufi orders see all humans as having the theoretical potential of becoming *Perfect* (Morrissey 117).

<sup>68</sup> The *nafs* is often translated as the *soul*.

interpretation such as the idea of taming the *nafs*. Additionally, as Isra and Mi'raj are commonly recounted in the theology of Islamic Mysticism, it makes sense to tie the Buraq to Sufi narratives.

While the Buraq is not mentioned in the chapter on Shurkheh's dragon dream, the Buraq is included in other parts of the *Safvat as-Safa*. The first illustration in the Aga Khan Museum manuscript of the *Safvat as-Safa* depicts the Prophet and Sheikh Ardabili together: one advances on a camel while the other advances on the Buraq. In this image, the spiritual journey of the Sheikh (and his followers) is connected to the night journey of the Prophet<sup>69</sup>. The idea of a "Personal Mir'aj" analogous to the Prophet's was not unique to the *Safvat as-Safa*; for example, Ibn al-Arabi<sup>70</sup>, one of the most well-known Sufi figures, wrote extensively about his own personal Mi'raj. Both the epic and romance genres, as I discuss in the next chapter, tie to the experience of a Personal Mi'raj. The hero's journey was often seen as an allegory for the spiritual path of Sufi initiates, and so, the slaying of a dragon fits quite nicely into these allegories as one of the steps along a spiritual path.

An old sage in the tale of *Bahram Gur* suggests that bravery is only useful when it is in pursuit of a higher goal, namely, love. "Death comes to every man," the sage says, "but love does not" (Chelkowski 91-93). In the next chapter, I turn to Sufi romances. In these texts, the heroes' bravery is challenged multiple times, similarly to the dragon-slayers in this chapter, in their searches for the women they love<sup>71</sup>. Seven times Bahram Gur's bravery and virtue help him to find a beautiful woman, and the same pattern repeats for the romantic heroes in the next section. Nizami's *Khamsa*<sup>72</sup> and the Deccani *Gulshan-i Ishq* use storytelling to combine the erotic, the moral, and the mystical (Chelkowski 113), to lead up to a mystical union with divine love.

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<sup>69</sup> The exact identities of the riders are unclear. For a closer analysis of this painting, see Erkmen 51-56.

<sup>70</sup> Though Ibn al-Arabi was born in el-Andalus (modern-day Spain), his ideas were extremely influential worldwide including in the subcontinent. For more information on his theology, see Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

<sup>71</sup> It is very common to link the Prophet's Mi'raj to stories of love. The "path of radical love" Omid Safi describes, "has an unmistakable fragrance of the ascension of Muhammad" (Radical Love xxvii).

<sup>72</sup> Three out of the six texts I discuss in this thesis are from the work of Nizami Ganjavi; this is no accident. Nizami's influence goes far beyond the literary world; though he was a poet, his works also made significant contributions to the world of visual art. His celebrated texts were often lavishly illustrated in manuscripts commissioned not only in his home region of Azerbaijan, but also across Iran and South Asia. Nizami's works eventually became the "most frequently illustrated Persian books" (Barry 33). The illustrations accompanying his texts served as models for visual culture across the Persianate and Muslim worlds, (Sharma, *Nizami's* 6). Through their use of Persian visual culture spread through Nizami's works, "different groups of people in Persianate societies could thus be claimants to the Persian cultural heritage even as they sought to forge a distinct identity for themselves" (ibid.). Michael Barry describes how "late medieval Eastern Muslim painters assumed, almost as a matter of course, that their viewers would be intimately familiar with Nizami's poetry" (77). As later painters referenced and copied the imagery of Nizami's illustrated manuscripts, they continued a common Persianate visual heritage while integrating local visual traditions.



FIGURE 13 PIR (ELDER) ALI PARNIQ'S DREAM OF THE SHEIKH WITH PROPHET MUHAMMAD. 1582 SHIRAZ, FROM THE SAFVAT AL-SAFA BY ISMA'IL BIN BAZZAZ. AGA KHAN MUSEUM, [HTTPS://AGAKHANMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/ARTIFACT/PIR-ELDER-ALI-PARNIQ-S-DREAM-OF-THE-SHAYKH-WITH-PROPHET-MUHAMMAD-AKM264-FOL116V](https://agakhanmuseum.org/collection/artifact/PIR-ELDER-ALI-PARNIQ-S-DREAM-OF-THE-SHAYKH-WITH-PROPHET-MUHAMMAD-AKM264-FOL116V).

The artistic traditions that I discuss cross political, religious, and artistic boundaries by coming into conversation with a myriad of different regional styles.

## THE LOVER, THE BELOVED, AND THE GUIDE

By looking at dragons in three classic Indo-Persian epics, *The Shahnameh*, *The Hamzehnameh*, and *Haft Paykar*, we can see the critical role dragons played in the character development of epic heroes. In all three texts, these men traversed large swaths of land and accomplished incredible feats, encountering at least one fierce dragon along the way. As they fought and slaughtered the dragon in battle, these literary heroes proved the bravery, strength, and skill that made them worthy of completing a great quest. Unlike Chinese traditions where the dragon is a wise guardian figure, the Persianate dragon is a terrifying entity that must be fought and killed: this creature is a barrier between the hero and his destination, and thus it must be destroyed in order for the hero to make progress on his journey and fulfill whatever quests may lay before him. All three of these works, *The Shahnameh*, *The Hamzehnameh*, and *Haft Paykar*, were largely secular<sup>73</sup>. However, the Buraq is not an areligious entity, but an animal unique to Islamic theology. To understand the entire composition of the Buraq images (dragon detail shown above), I must go beyond the tail and analyse the composite animal as a whole. Therefore, I turn to three more texts to bridge interpretations of the dragon tail with the other animals in the body of the Buraq to unveil the religious meaning behind the composite image.



FIGURE 14 DETAIL, THE FABULOUS CREATURE BURAQ. GOLCONDA 1660-1680.



FIGURE 15 DETAIL, AL-BURAQ. HYDERABAD 1770-1780.

<sup>73</sup> In the premodern world, there is not always a clear distinction between “secular” and religious. However, I use the word “secular” here to emphasize that there is no overtly religious content in the texts, even if there may be religious underpinning.

The hagiography of the Sufi Sheikh, Ardabili, reveals the dragon as neither a living creature nor a mere fantasy; rather, he is a manifestation of the mind. The dragon is an embodiment of the ego or *nafs*. The ego must be tamed to progress on a “spiritual journey” or “Personal Mi’raj” that imitates the Prophet Muhammad’s ascension to the heavens. With the dragon in the Buraq paintings, we bridge the secular hero’s journey with the spiritual journey of the Prophet to Jerusalem and the heavens. A number of romantic epics describe this journey through allegory, including the three I will be discussing in this chapter: *Khusrau va Shirin* and *Layla va Majnun*<sup>74</sup> by Nizami, and the *Gulshan-I Ishq* by Nusrati<sup>75</sup>.

Just as Sufi leaders used allegories to describe the Personal Mi’raj, the Buraq images paint a visual allegory<sup>76</sup> for the Isra and Mi’raj journey<sup>77</sup>. Tales of the hero’s journey mimicked the path of Sufi discipleship, creating a link between the personal spiritual journey of a Sufi initiate and the Prophet’s journey by night. In this style of literature, “sublime love almost always manifests itself in the form of the amorous relationship between two earthly lovers who have to overcome various obstacles in order to be one” (Mannani 162). In all three of these romantic epics, a significant part of their plot takes place in a wilderness filled with animals just like the ones in the Buraq paintings. I have selected these texts mainly for three qualities: they connect to the previous texts by similarly featuring heroes on a quest, they are relevant to the Buraq imagery with their descriptions of forest animals, and they were widely read and referenced at the time and place of the Buraq paintings’ creation. These texts use the format of an epic romance to describe an intense emotional and spiritual quest for the love of God<sup>78</sup>.

Nizami’s classic romance, *Khusrau va Shirin*<sup>79</sup>, was the most popular story in the *Khamasa* (*Quintet*) for illustration and had a profound effect on Persianate visual culture, and specifically on

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<sup>74</sup> The name “Majnun” literally means “madman” in Arabic. He was described as mad due to his excessive love; *‘ishq*, or love, when it was in excess was often characterized as a mental disorder (Dols 317).

<sup>75</sup> Nusrati, a famous Deccani author, wrote in Dakhni Urdu while taking from Persian cultural heritage (including Nizami’s epic poetry), forming his own tradition of poetry and illustration in a uniquely Bijapuri style.

<sup>76</sup> For more information on the idea of the visual allegory in Islamic South Asian contexts, see Ebba Koch “The Mughal Emperor As Solomon, Majnun, And Orpheus, Or The Album As A Think Tank for Allegory.”

<sup>77</sup> This includes, but is not limited to, the Sheikh al-Akbar (Greatest Sheikh), Ibn al-Arabi who was well-known in South Asia, as well as non-Sufi scholars such as Ibn Sina.

<sup>78</sup> It was not uncommon to use seemingly secular stories to describe religious morals. Sisir Kumar Das emphasizes that “Sufi poetry attained a new dimension both in terms of poetic intensity and spiritual fervour when poets started exploiting secular legends involving characters deeply in love” (215).

<sup>79</sup> I will use the original Persian name of the romance since I am using Nizami’s version of the story, especially given that it has never been translated into Urdu. Amir Khusrau Dihlavi rewrote the romance as *Khusrau-Shirin*, though the

the iconography of the Buraq (Weinstein 147). An illustration of the Buraq accompanies a poem dedicated to the animal; this image, pictured below, is likely the most famous Buraq illustration in Muslim history<sup>80</sup>. This long poem, "Mi'raj of the Prophet," eulogizes the Buraq and provides a detailed description of its physical features that are then used in many pictorial depictions of the animal<sup>81</sup>. However, the Deccani Buraqs do not align with Nizami's description, even though many of its elements are visually similar to other illustrations in his texts. Therefore, I turn to his works to find common themes depicted in the Buraq illustration, even if the iconography was not pulled directly from illustrations of his text.

The story of *Layla va Majnun* also seems to have connections to the Buraq composite paintings, namely in its representations of tamed wild animals, as I will discuss later in this chapter. Nizami "enlivens" the pre-existing story of Laila va Majnun, likely the most famous love story in the Islamic world<sup>82</sup>, by adding beautiful descriptions of nature, animals, and the seasons (Chelkowski 66)<sup>83</sup>. In these descriptions, he paints a picture of Majnun surrounded by animals: they comfort him as he escapes to the wilderness when he is not allowed to marry his one true love. These added flourishes are mirrored in the animals in the body of the Deccani Buraq paintings. Majnun (literally: crazy one) is more than just a character; he is an archetype of the "madman-poet-dervish" who has forgone all his status in society, wandering about bewildered by the object of his undying love (Sharma, *Nizami's* 7). This semi-fictional character is immortalized today as a representation of the Sufi "lover" archetype who strives for union with God against all obstacles.<sup>84</sup>

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story of Farhad is the most celebrated section inspiring numerous adaptations including the 1956 Bollywood film, *Shirin Farhad*.

<sup>80</sup> This poem has not yet been translated into English. For a short description of the physical features of the Buraq in this poem, see Appendix IV "Description of the Buraq in Nizami."

<sup>81</sup> Surprisingly, the Buraq poem adjoins the tale of *Khusrau va Shirin*, despite the fact that this story has no direct associations with Islamic theology, nor any mention of the Buraq. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing the Buraq with *Khusrau va Shirin*, Nizami connects Khusrau's steed Shabdiz, fabled as the fastest horse in the world, with the Prophet's lightning-fast steed, the Buraq.

<sup>82</sup> Claudia Yaghoobi states in her comparative chapter on Layla and Majnun and Lancelot and Guinevere that "The love story of Majnun and Laila is one of the most popular passionate romances in the Muslim world" (95).

<sup>83</sup> Majnun's writings were part of the pre-Islamic genre of 'Udhri poetry where the "poet-lover" is driven mad for his beloved (Sells 91). In South Asia, the story was transformed again when Amir Khusrau Dihlavi (d. 1325) wrote his own version of Layla and Majnun in his Persian *Khamisa* modelled directly on the *Khamisa* of Nizami (see John Seyller "Pearls of the Parrot of India). Nizami gives Majnun a high spiritual status as a poet when he describes poetry as "close to prophethood" (Buegel 40). For more information on Majnun's poetry, see translations of Qays Ibn al-Mulawwah in "Udhri Ghazal: a Poem Attributed to Majnun Layla."

<sup>84</sup> The story's prominence in South Asia is evident from references in modern Pakistani poetry, Bollywood songs, and film. Examples include Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem, "Whilst We Breathe" (Kiernan 158-159); the song "Layla



FIGURE 16 THE MI'RAJ OF THE PROPHET. 1539-43, FROM THE KHAMSA OF NIZAMI. COMMISSIONED BY SHAH TAHMASP I. WIKIMEDIA COMMONS, [HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKI/FILE:MIRAJ\\_BY\\_SULTAN\\_MUHAMMAD.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MIRAJ_BY_SULTAN_MUHAMMAD.JPG).

Majnu” from the film *Awesome Mausam*; and three Bollywood films titled “Laila Majnu” from 1940, 1976, and 2018.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s poem follows below:

*Through my breath, in the street of crazed obsession,  
the sheikh's cloak, the emir's robe and the royal  
crown stand abashed and ashamed,  
through me, Mansur crazed with God and Majnun crazed  
in love, are still living,  
through me the flowered coat and the lopsided cap,  
live on. (My translation, as found in “A Collaged Translation of Faiz.”)*

Similarly, the Deccani *Gulshan-I Ishq*<sup>85</sup> also uses a lover's quest to mirror the Sufi quest for union with God. The *Gulshan-I Ishq* and other *ashqiyya mathnawis* (epic love poems) describe the "trials and triumphs" of the "path of love" in a way that mirrors Mir'aj accounts (Husain 157). The *Gulshan-I Ishq* is part of a series of stories written and rewritten over centuries in multiple South Asian languages that use and reuse the characters Manohar and Madhumalati as their hero and heroine<sup>86</sup>. Together, the Urdu *Gulshan-I Ishq* and the Persian *Laila va Majnun* and *Khusrau va Shirin* unite the pre-Islamic traditions of the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and South Asia with their contemporary Muslim milieus. These Sufi romances are linked in a "self-referential" genre that transcended time and place; therefore, we can imagine the themes of these stories to be connected to larger cultural ideas (Haidar, *Gulshan* 295).

Though the romances I discuss here were often written into expensive, illustrated manuscripts, they were not restricted to an elite audience. For example, the *Gulshan-I Ishq*<sup>87</sup> centred around the activity of Sufi shrines; in these spaces, people of diverse castes, classes, and religions were all welcome. The recitation of texts at Sufi shrines enabled listeners of varying backgrounds to have more intimate access to religious activity than the more legalistic organs of religion allowed<sup>88</sup>. However, though one might not need to be of a particular caste or class to be involved with the activities at a Sufi centre, being officially initiated into these communities was a long and arduous affair that most people would not have the luxury to complete. This initiation process, however arduous, inspired narratives that parallel a Sufi practitioner's spiritual journey. We may not know the full range of audiences for tales like the *Gulshan-I Ishq*, nonetheless, the preferred reader/listener would surely be the Sufi initiate. As Behl states, the "ritual manipulation of the listening self was the

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<sup>85</sup> The poet Nusrati wrote the *Gulshan-I Ishq* in 1657-58 Bijapur, a then-thriving Deccan city.

<sup>86</sup> These texts have been studied as a whole by Ali Akbar Husain and Aditya Behl; the latter has done a full translation of the North Indian version of *Madhumalati* composed in 1545, over one hundred years before the Bijapur text. This version of the text, though written at a Sufi centre, uses Hindu characters and connects to Hindu philosophies, as described in the appendix titled "The Symmetry of Madhumalati (Behl, *Madhumalati* 229-41). Although the text has never been translated in full, curator Navina Najat Haidar has done an extended summary based on a beautifully illustrated manuscript in her chapter in *The Visual World of Muslim India*<sup>86</sup>. As I am focusing mainly on the narrative of the story Haidar's summary as well as the other commentaries on the text, this discussion should be sufficient to gauge its importance for the Buraq paintings.

<sup>87</sup> And other stories in this genre.

<sup>88</sup> "Although the hadith-oriented Islamic Establishment was still very much alive in the academies of Muslim learning," Carl Ernst states, "it did not hold a monopoly over the aspirations of Indian Muslims" (*Hagiography to Martyrology* 327). Further, Richard M. Eaton shows how Sufism brought Islamic concepts across the boundaries of religion through a particular case of rural women of various religious backgrounds interacting with Sufi centres in his article "Sufi Folk Literature and the Expansion of Indian Islam". I mention it as well in my blog entry titled "Spinning to the Tune of Sufi Thought."



most valued part of the reception of the Hindavi Sufi romances, making the Sufi novice under the guidance of a teaching sheikh the ideal reader of the romances” (*Subtle Magic* 29).<sup>89</sup> Allegories like these were ideal instructional tools for the Sufi initiate because they help tap into the faculty of imagination in a way that prose could not. The imagination functions as a vehicle along the spiritual journey by becoming the “locus of vision that permits the initiate to experience and visualize the divine world” (Hughes 5) and takes the reader/listener on a journey that mirrors their spiritual progress.<sup>90</sup>



FIGURE 17 PORTRAIT OF NUSRATI WRITING THE GULSHAN-I ISHQ. 1743 DECCAN INDIA, FROM THE GULSHAN-I ISHQ BY NUSRATI. PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILAMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTIONS/PERMANENT/338342.HTML](https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/338342.html).

The importance of the “journey” described in the texts I analyse is emphasized in Sufi practice through its nomenclature: a particular school or order of Sufism is known as a *tariqah* (path); and the disciple on the path of a particular *tariqah* was known as a *salik*, or traveller (Behl, *Madhumalati* xxiii). The path that the traveller took, though unique to them, would follow a general set of stages that are mirrored in the structures of the texts I am analysing in this chapter. The path of any Muslim begins at birth when they are in perfect awareness of God. But, as they grow older, they become forgetful and fall into patterns that deny that relationship with God. As they forget their closeness to God, they must recognize their love and turn back to the divine in remembrance (*dhikr*). As they go through years of struggle and hardship to rekindle a relationship, they find a guide to help

<sup>89</sup> Evidence for the connection between Hindavi romances and Sufi activities can be found in long introductions that rarely fail to give “thanks to the author’s spiritual guide” (Behl, *Madhumalati* xvii). These authors were often partaking in the Sufi initiation process themselves, and thus they took care to emphasize the supremacy of their spiritual guide and their importance to the themes of their story.

<sup>90</sup> Nizami describes the speed of the imagination when he asks: “Have you seen the speed with which the imagination travels the world?” (translation from de Fouchecour 183, from the *Khamasa*, Bayt 36). The imagination, like the Buraq, is described as something that can travel at speeds incomparable to that of the human body.

them, such as a Sufi teacher. This spiritual guide helps them along their path, giving them direction to reach their goal instead of wandering aimlessly. After years of striving, a Sufi practitioner hopes to meet the ultimate goal: being united in perfect harmony with God<sup>91</sup>. This journey can be described through three steps or stages, though they may vary in number based on the particular Sufi school.<sup>92</sup>

I summarize them as follows:

1. Original Contact (with God or the Beloved)
2. Hardship and struggle
3. Meeting with God

The first stage along the spiritual path is the original contact: the first contact with the Beloved or God. This union occurs before birth, a union in which the child witnesses the sovereignty of God (Knysh 68). In these stories, a female muse substitutes for God: God is the most beloved and the most desired, just as the women are. And so, each story begins with an initial meeting of the beloved that mirrors the perfect union with God before birth. Only after this meeting with the beloved, and the subsequent separation from them, does the hero begin their search.

In *Khusrau va Shirin*, neither Khusrau nor Shirin meet nor see the other before a desire is inflamed. When Shirin first discovers Khusrau, it is through a portrait hung on a tree in the woods. Without seeing the prince in the flesh, “her gaze is transfixed,” and she is unable to take herself away from the prince’s likeness (Minuchehr 113). Though she has not touched, felt, nor smelt him, she is intensely attracted to him. With so little as a description of their beloved, an epic search

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<sup>91</sup> Among different Sufi tariqas, there are slight differences in the final goal of the spiritual path: for al-Bistami, the goal was *wahdat ash-shuhud* (the Oneness of Witnessing); for Ibn al-Arabi, it was *wahdat al-wujud* (the Oneness of Existing); and for Ibn Tufayl, it was *dhawq*, the direct experience of the divine (al-Azma 95-96 and Hughes 100). As I do not know whether the Buraq images were connected to any particular Sufi school, I will talk about this end-goal in a general sense simply as a union with God.

<sup>92</sup> Given the vast diversity of Sufi communities, there can be many variations in the exact stages, stations or, *maqamat* of the spiritual journey. Al-Bistami, for example, used the motif of the seven heavens to parallel the *maqamat*. For Indian Sufi practitioners, their journey is often divided into five steps, as outlined in the *Jawahir-i Khamsah (Five Jewels)* of Muhammad Ghaus, going from the obligatory prayers to the full realization of divine truth (Behl, Madhumalati xx). Aaron W. Hughes reduces these to only three: separation (from their customary existence), marginalization (from their traditional mode of Being-in-the-world), and ultimately aggregation (back into society as new and changed individuals) (19). I will use my slightly expanded version, however, as it fits more easily with the texts I will be discussing. For the purpose of this study, I use the above five stages as they fit more easily with the texts I am discussing and are held fairly consistently across different groups in some form.

starts for Khusrau and Shirin. Their experience reflects the human experience of God; he cannot be touched, felt, nor smelt by any human being on earth, yet Muslims maintain what could seem like an irrational and unwavering belief and trust in God. However, though God may not manifest empirically in the physical world, God may still be accessed through Islamic practices: prayer, fasting, and other rituals that give a sensory experience of the divine. It is through these practices that Muslims remember their union with God. Similarly, the Buraq painting can serve as a reminder of the spiritual journey that connects a Muslim to God.

When Qays met Layla, he immediately fell in love with her in a blind devotion that evokes the state of “pristine faithfulness” that humans have with God before birth (Knysh 88). Qays is celebrated for having a perfect, unselfish love for Layla that mirrors the love Muslims should have for God. Since God's reality is beyond human comprehension and cannot be described, the love of a human being, such as Qays' love for Layla, helps describe the love a human should have for God. In this way, the love of an immaterial God can be cultivated through the love of God's creation. The erotic desire of Qays for Layla serves as a framework both for the love of God and the relationship of a Sufi master and their follower. The awakening of desire in these romances can be likened to discipleship in a Sufi *tariqa*-- discipleship was known as *iradat*, literally meaning desire (Ernst, *Eternal Garden* 133).

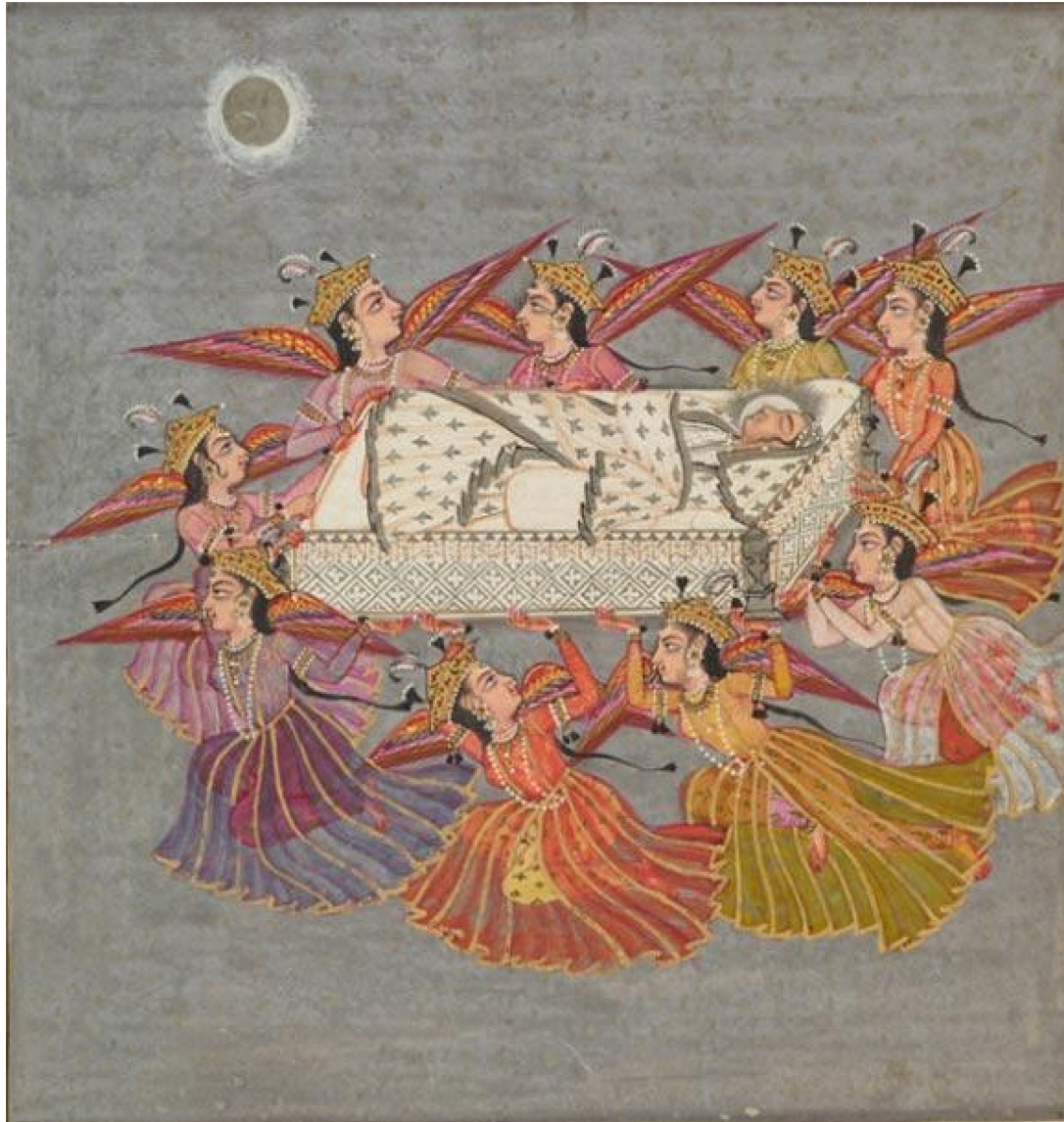


FIGURE 18 FLYING FAIRIES TRANSPORT A SLEEPING PRINCE MANOHAR TO THE PRINCESS'S PALACE. 1743 DECCAN INDIA, FROM THE GULSHAN-I ISHQ BY NUSRATI. PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILAMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTIONS/PERMANENT/338417.HTML?MULR=689489868](https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/338417.html?MULR=689489868).

In the initial encounter of Madhumalati and Manohar, “erotic desire is aroused between the hero and the heroine” (Behl, *Subtle Magic* 22). The *Gulshan-i Ishq* alludes to the journey of Isra and Mi'raj with the appearance of flying beings. A mischievous group of *peris* (or faeries)<sup>93</sup> lift the bed of Manohar into the air and bring him to the chamber of the princess Madhumalati where the two instantly fall in love and embrace. The flying *peris* act like the flying Buraq, lifting Manohar through the dark of the night to meet his beloved, just as the Buraq lifted the Prophet Muhammad

<sup>93</sup> “Fairy people” are often described in religious narratives of South Asia, such as in anecdotes of the Sufi leader Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 1325) (Digby 241).

into the sky. As the Prophet was uniquely privileged to enter into God's throne room, Manohar is privileged to enter Madhumalati's intimate chambers; this meeting of lover and beloved follows the meeting of the soul with God and sets the tone for a journey that mirrors the concepts of Islamic theology (Behl, *Madhumalati* xvii). But, just like the Prophet, as quickly as he ascended he again returns to Earth, being deposited back into his own chambers before morning.

Those who become seekers of God feel an "irresistible attraction of the sublime" with which "the seeker is symbolically conveyed through lines depicting the physical beauty of an earthly beloved, and the pain of separation from the Divine" (Mannani 162). Manohar and Madhumalati suffer this pain of separation when they wake. In the morning, Manohar finds himself back in his own kingdom, far away from this unknown princess. As he returns to his kingdom, he feels as if he has left the heavenly realm, just as the Prophet returns to the Earth from the heavens after the Mi'raj. Expelled from his lover's embrace, he lives in the sadness of earthly reality; painfully removed from the realm of the Beloved, the gravity of the *duniya* (earthly world) pulls the lover away from God's spiritual realm.

In all three stories, the lovers are separated after their initial meeting. Whether separation from the beloved is brought on by family disapproval, physical distance, or any other means, the romantic hero and the Sufi initiate alike enter into a period of hardship and struggle in order to regain union with their beloved. In the three stories, this struggle becomes a physical landscape: the hero must traverse through a forbidding wilderness with nothing but the hope that a path will clear to show him to his beloved. This physical landscape differs depending on the setting of the story, but whether it is a desert, a forest, or a jungle, the meaning is the same: the wilderness is a physical space where the temporal experience of hardship is expressed through geography. These challenging landscapes reflect the difficulty in forging a path to union with God or the Beloved.

In the wilderness, the protagonists find a cacophony of wild animals. The wild animals in the body of the Buraq paintings, coupled with the vegetal decoration surrounding them, suggest a connection to the wild forests of these stories. When Layla's family rejects Majnun and forbids any contact between the two lovers, Majnun chooses to enter the wilderness, foregoing any connection to human society. But before Majnun decides to leave his camp, he searches for a connection to Layla in anything and everything. When he comes across her dog in an alley, he kisses its paw, ignoring Arab prejudices against the animal (Schimmel 132). Like a dervish who finds God in

everything they see, Majnun finds a hint of Layla in everything he sees. This dog is more beloved to him than the humans he was surrounded by; the dog, as shown in the illustration above, has no prejudice against Majnun, while Majnun's own kinsmen only stare and shame him. In a cruel and prejudiced world, the animals are much kinder. And so, Majnun prefers the barren desert to humans with barren hearts; thus, he throws himself into the wilderness in a willing rejection of society itself.

As he wanders through the desert, Majnun grows hungry and frail, until, finally, he finds a gorge to provide him with shelter and water. He takes shelter there amongst the animals, gaining comfort from them but continuing to grow thin (Chelkowski 57). In a mirroring of Christian and Muslim ascetic practices, he refuses to eat not out of a lack of resources, but out of a lovesickness spurred on by his excessive devotion to Layla. Even when Majnun is found by a prince who serves him an entire banquet of food, he refuses to take a single bite. "Majnun would eat no food and drink no wine, and he uttered no word but 'Layla!'" (Chelkowski 57).

While in the desert, Majnun became a protector of the animals who took pity on him. In his wanderings, he came across a gazelle and saw in it the dark eyes of his beloved<sup>94</sup>. When a hunter planned to kill it, he was mortified. He begged him to stop his hunt, offering his own horse in recompense for the lost meat. The pattern continued when he came across a stag the next day: he begged the man to stop his hunt, and with no horse to offer, Majnun gave him all that is left of his belongings in the hope that the stag will be left alone (Chelkowski 58-59). By caring for these animals, Majnun goes beyond his own ego by putting the animals' needs before his own; he showed that he cared for much more than his flesh when he went out of his way to treat all of God's creation with love and care.

As Majnun retreats into the wilderness to meditate, the animals collect around his person. The concentration of animals is emblematic of his calm presence, intense love, and otherworldly spirituality. People with this kind of connection to animals were often understood as having a higher level of religiosity; this includes the prophet and King Solomon who was known for his just rule as well as his romantic endeavours<sup>95</sup>. Comparing the paintings of Majnun in the following pages with

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<sup>94</sup> "Gazelle" in Arabic culture can also be used to describe an attractive woman.

<sup>95</sup> Believed to be the author of the Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible, he extended his love and care to animals just as much as humans. It was said that Solomon was able to talk to animals and would show them extreme respect, so much so that in repayment, the animals miraculously fought for Solomon in battle, thus protecting his realm just as the animals protected the poor Majnun. Accordingly, both Solomon and Majnun are often painted with kingdoms of animals surrounding them, and accordingly, they are both associated with an erotic relationship to the divine. Given

the composite animal of the Buraq, we see notable similarities. All the animals are rendered in the same tone to create a unified composition that breaks the boundaries between species. Majnun brought the animal kingdom together around his person through his kindness, just as various animals who may or may not normally interact are connected through the image of the Buraq composite painting. The bringing together of animals tame and untame, predator and prey, in perfect harmony, is central to the image of Majnun.

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the proliferation of these images, it is not unreasonable to assume that the painters who placed a menagerie in the body of the Buraq would have also been familiar with pictures of Solomon and Majnun surrounded by an animal kingdom. Solomon is said to have been able to speak to animals, and a famous story describes how when Solomon was a young child, his mother had asked him to kill an ant that was crawling on his clothes, but Solomon refused to bring any harm to the insect (Renard, *Friends of God* 23). Minissale connects the two characters in his discussion of paintings by Maddu Khana-Zad, who painted similar scenes with both Solomon and Majnun. Minissale discusses how Solomon and Majnun are connected in the poetry of Nizami, “not because of self-exile but this time because both appear to make the kingdom of animals obedient to their respective wills” (102-103).



FIGURE 19 MAJNUN IN THE WILDERNESS. LATE 16TH CENTURY IRAN. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, [HTTPS://WWW.METMUSEUM.ORG/ART/COLLECTION/SEARCH/450588](https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/450588).





FIGURE 20 NARSING. LAYLA VISITS MAJNUN IN THE WILDERNESS. 1597-98 LAHORE, MUGHAL INDIA, FROM THE KHAMSA BY AMR KHUSRAW DIHLAVI, COMMISSIONED BY EMPEROR AKBAR. THE WALTERS MUSEUM, [HTTPS://ART.THEWALTERS.ORG/DETAIL/31624/LAYL-VISITS-MAJNUN-IN-THE-WILDERNESS/](https://art.thewalters.org/detail/31624/layl-visits-majnun-in-the-wilderness/).

When Manohar began his journey, he was not in the desert nor the forest, but at sea. When he woke from his night encounter with Madhumalati, he was determined to find her, and so he set out with a search party. As he leaves his home kingdom, he enters a fictional landscape often described by Hindavi authors as “the shadow of paradise on earth;” however, the beginning of his journey does not at all resemble paradise (Behl, *Subtle Magic* 29). Instead of a pristine garden, Manohar is thrust into a hellish sea that engulfs all signs of his princely might. Just as the Prophet’s heart was taken out of his chest and washed before he could embark on his nighttime voyage,

Manohar's heart must also be purified<sup>96</sup>. Before being allowed to enter paradise, he must wash his heart and purify his soul.

However, purifying the heart is not as simple as a wash in cold water; Manohar must undergo multiple tests to prove his worthiness. After just a short time at sea, Manohar's entire fleet was devoured by sea serpents<sup>97</sup>, leaving him to reach land on a raft (Haidar, *Gulshan* 309). Like Jonah in the whale, Manohar is left alone with no one to help him but God. This kind of test is described in the Qur'an: "And We shall certainly try you with something of fear and hunger and loss of property and lives and fruits. And give good news to the patient, who, when a misfortune befalls them, say: Surely we are Allah's, and to Him we shall return" (Qur'an 2:155-156).



FIGURE 21 A SEA SERPENT ATTACKS PRINCE MANOHAR'S FLEET. 1743 DECCAN INDIA, FROM THE GULSHAN-I ISHQ BY NUSRATI. PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILAMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/OBJECT/338553](https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338553).

<sup>96</sup> Al-Ghazali describes the idea of purifying the soul in the *Ihya Ulum al-Din (Revival of the Religious Sciences)*. Though this large work has never been translated in full, portions have been rendered into English such as *The Marvels of the Heart*, published in 2010.

<sup>97</sup> These serpentine, leviathan-like dragon figures have some similarities to *nagas*, giant serpents from Hindu mythology. Like the sea serpent in the image, they are often associated with oceans and bodies of water.

Manohar floats into the Kajliban (lampblack) forest while all sight of his kingdom fades into the horizon. In this dark, uninhabited place, his princely title is no longer relevant; he has entered “the spiritual jurisdiction of Sufi authority” (Behl, *Subtle Magic* 27). He spends a year wandering through this desert of difficulty, adopting the lifestyle of an ascetic. However, his true sorrow is not his lack of pomp and circumstance, but his separation from his beloved (White 131). The vivid imagery in the text helps us to picture this sorrowful landscape, pictured in the illustration below:

Hardship was like a rosary around his neck, resignation was his bowl, contentment was the ashes the yogis rub on to their bodies, his sighs played the role of the horn; Patience was used as rings in the ear, Humility was the satchel; Worldly comfort was like the deer-hide to be trampled over. (Translation from Haidar, *Gulshan* 302)

The serenity of the animals in the image mirrors the animals in both the *Majnun in the Forest* paintings and the *Deccani Buraqs*.



FIGURE 22 KING BIKRAM SEARCHES FOR THE HOLY MAN. 1743 DECCAN INDIA, FROM THE GULSHAN-I ISHQ BY NUSRATI. PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILAMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTIONS/634-549.HTML#OBJECT/338360](https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/634-549.html#object/338360).

In many religions, including Islam, finding solitude outside civilization is a way to connect with God. The Prophet Muhammad, for example, was known to go to a cave to meditate and reflect, and this practice is continued by many Muslim mystics and students of theology today. However, leaving the comforts of home did not necessitate staying in a cave. In a world before Google Maps and instant translation, travelling anywhere beyond one's village was a lonesome endeavour; thus, another way to gain insight and renew a deeper connection with God was by separating oneself from everyday comfort through travel. Due to the great hardship of travelling, this form of sacrifice became a popular expression of asceticism and supererogatory devotion towards God.<sup>98</sup> All three romantic heroes, Khusrau, Majnun, and Manohar, must travel on their quest for their beloveds, specifically, in a wilderness full of wild animals. As a result, they became like the wandering dervish, a specific type of Sufi practitioner who rejects society and travels from place to place as a way of finding God<sup>99</sup>. This ordeal of travelling unknown lands, Behl describes, is modelled on the Prophet Muhammad's "passage to a heavenly realm" through Isra and Mi'raj (*Madhumalati* xviii).

Though solitude may be an important part of spiritual development, one need not be wholly alone to succeed on a spiritual quest. A person may find helpers "who commonly exemplify spiritual values" and therewith can give them guidance on their journey (Behl, *Subtle Magic* 22). In fact, most communities prescribed that a dervish must follow a sheikh or pir without question in order to become a *dervish* or Sufi practitioner. Manohar, though not initiated into a Sufi community, comes across a lone dervish who helps him along his path<sup>100</sup>:

After having walked for six months in the wood known as Kajli Ban Manohar saw a light. There was a piece of clearing, circular in shape, over which the sun shone. In that ring of light Manohar could see a hermit sitting who was fully absorbed in meditation. He had, it seemed, reached the zenith of renunciation... His locks of hair stretched out like hanging

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<sup>98</sup>One could say that this practice began before Muhammad, with prophets such as Moses, the Jewish leader who wanders through the wilderness, who guides his Hebrew community in order to find the promised land of Israel. Unlike today where it is relatively easy to jump on a plane and fly to a distant land, travelling was very dangerous through most of Muslim history. There is evidence of this in the traditional categories of people eligible for *zakat* or the Islamic alms tax: travellers are counted amongst slaves and the poor as legitimate recipients of such a donation. *Zakat* is an obligatory tax similar to tithes in Catholicism, except that rather than having a portion of one's income dedicated to the church, it must be given directly to a category of people in need, or given to a body that will distribute it to such people.

<sup>99</sup>The most famous of these is Shams, the companion of Jalal ud-din Rumi. For more information on Rumi and his writings see *The Discourses of Rumi, or Fihi ma Fihi*.

<sup>100</sup>In some other versions, the dervish is replaced with a yogi; however, the presence of a lone ascetic of some kind is consistent.

twigs in which birds had made their nests. His arms and legs were thin like dry sticks but his body shone like the Moon. Since he was thin he looked like a crescent curved on the sides. His eyes twinkled like stars but his lips were tight. (Summary from Haidar, Gulshan 311).

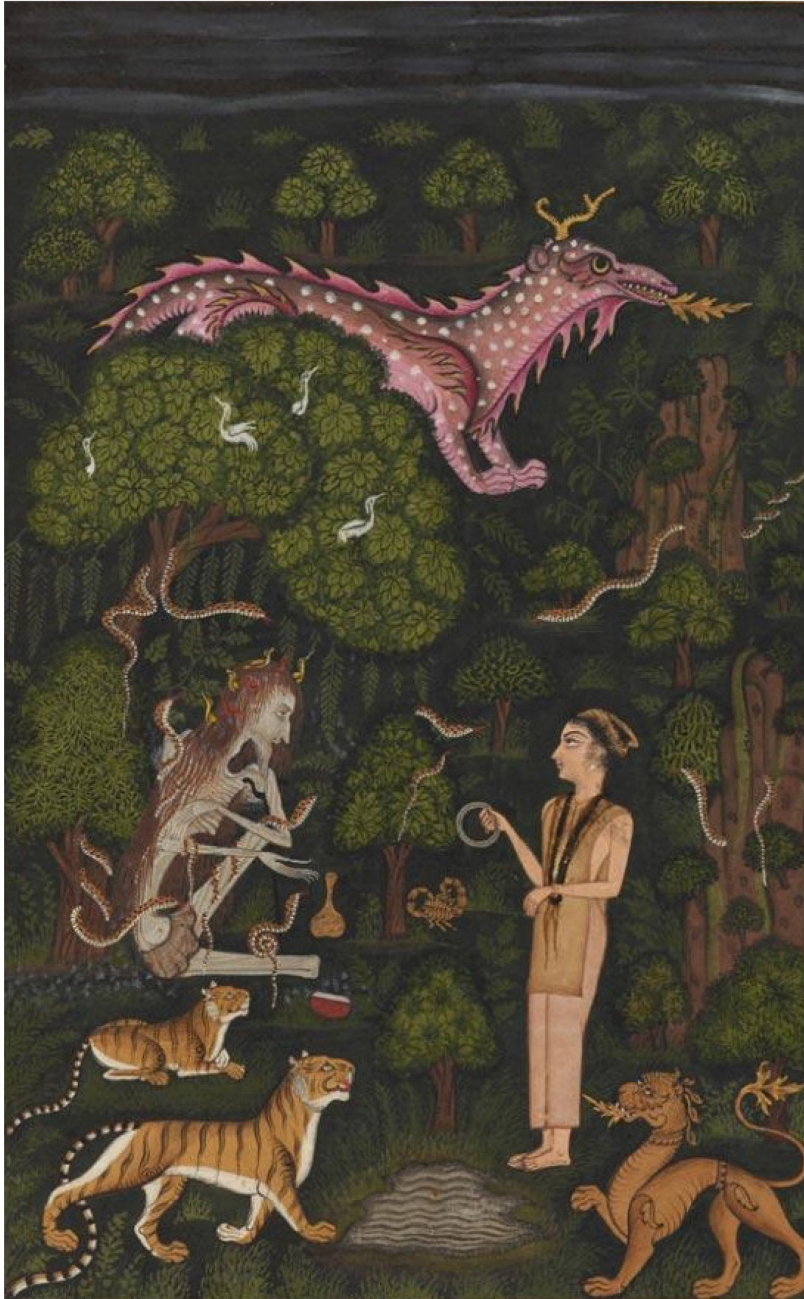


FIGURE 23 PRINCE MANOHAR RECEIVES A MAGIC RING FROM A HERMIT. 1743 DECCAN INDIA, FROM THE GULSHAN-I ISHQ BY NUSRATI. PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILAMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/OBJECT/338577](https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338577).

Both dervish and prince begin to have the same appearance: a thin neglected body that looks more like a sickly weeping willow than a fleshy human being. The painting on the previous page illustrates an emaciated dervish figure who has forgotten his worldly needs. Instead of dominating nature as most humans do with agriculture, hunting, and so forth, the dervish allows himself to enter into a symbiotic relationship with the animals around him: they have no fear of him and he no fear of them. The slithering snake in the painting twirls around the dervish's body, and he takes no notice. The dervish, surrounded by animals, prefers them to human company, just like Majnun had preferred the animals of the desert to his former family and friends. Navina Najat Haidar relates the depiction of the dervish in the painting above to depictions of Majnun, who becomes similarly emaciated as he wanders in the forest but gains help from the animals therein (*Gulshan* 311). Though not as emaciated as the dervish, Manohar definitely does not look like a prince in this image. The hero seems to be becoming more and more like an ascetic as he undergoes a "necessary transformation (...) into a yogi on an ascetic quest" while his clothing and stature slowly approach that of the sage (Behl, *Subtle Magic* 23).

The dervish offers Manohar aid by gifting him a magic ring to use in a time of need. While the dervish does not specify its use, it becomes clear when Prince Manohar encountered a multitude of demons or *diws*. In this passage, the demons fulfill the same role as the dragons do in other stories; they are a barrier along the path to fulfilling Manohar's love-quest. The demons he cannot defeat with his sword, he defeated with the magic ring. As Manohar decapitates the demons, he slaughters the evil in his own ego, using the tools that the dervish gave him to complete his quest. With the combination of his own strength and the pir's help, he is able to slay these demons. However, though the dervish may give him tools to complete his quest, he must still do the fighting on his own. The same concept applies to the Prophet's helpers on Isra and Mi'raj, namely the Buraq and Gabriel; they can transport Muhammad to the heavens, but they must leave him when he lifts God's veils and views God seated on the throne. Sufi leaders, similarly, help their adherents as they guide them along their spiritual path, but in the end the practitioner must find their own way to God (Knysh 70).



FIGURE 24 PRINCE MANOHAR SLICING THE DEMON INTO PIECES. 1743 DECCAN INDIA, FROM THE GULSHAN-I ISHQ BY NUSRATI. PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILAMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/OBJECT/338619](https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338619).

While Majnun does not meet any sages along his way, he becomes his own sage by unknowingly adopting ascetic practices. In leaving his family and tribe, he has shed all connection to the *duniya*<sup>101</sup>. “I live like the wild animals that roam around me,” he says; “I am a stranger to my tribe” (Chelkoswki 62). Similarly, Manohar becomes more Sufi-like during his journey as there is a rapprochement between the Sufi Master and their initiate. Whether an Indian prince or a Bedouin son, the men of these stories follow the same script by leaving the comforts of home, entering a mystical jurisdiction that exists outside of everyday society. They prefer the unknown, wild landscape because without their beloved there is no comfort in the familiar. The familiar becomes uncomfortable and the uncomfortable becomes familiar as the heroes are stripped down to nothing but flesh, blood, and minimal clothing. The lover goes beyond status and rank when all hierarchy is obliterated in favour of the pursuit of love.

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<sup>101</sup> I must also note that though the “lover” archetype was most often a masculine figure, particularly in Iran if not in South Asia, it was not exclusively so. Majnun’s beloved, Layla, also takes on ascetic traits. She is asked to marry another man and, abiding by custom, she agrees but refuses to sleep with her husband (Chelkowski 60). Once Layla’s husband dies from a sudden illness, she pretends to mourn for him, but in reality she weeps only for Majnun. She takes advantage of the Arab custom of two-year seclusion for widows, using this time to freely express her pent-up grief from being denied marrying Majnun. Like Majnun, she neglects her own physical needs to such an extent that she becomes sickly and thin, just like him, mirroring ascetic practices, just like he did.

Just as two people being in love does not preclude others from experiencing the same thing, the Buraq asks that others may be able to experience a profound spiritual journey like the Prophet's. As evident from the common themes in the three stories of this chapter, the journey of finding the Beloved is not unique. In a Bengali Mi'raj account, before the Prophet mounts his steed, the Buraq asks that others may be allowed to ride it in future (Irani 241). The Buraq wishes that anyone may have the opportunity to take a journey to the heavens. While other humans did not ride on the Buraq, they were still able to have their own Personal Mi'raj. The Mi'raj is a "paradigm for every potential Muslim" (Hughes 43). Any individual may find a helper to guide them on their path as they purify themselves to be worthy of a journey to the divine. While Manohar found a dervish, and Majnun became like a dervish himself, Khusrau had not a human helper but an animal one. His steed, Shabdiz, like the Buraq, serves as Khusrau's majestic vehicle on his journey. The steed as a helper to the hero is a common archetype in Persian culture that can be traced back to pre-Islamic stories, such as Rostam's steed, Rakhsh<sup>102</sup>, from the *Shahnameh*.

Like the Prophet's mount, Rostam's steed is not bought but bestowed upon him as if by magic. The capturing of this horse combines both luck and ingenuity as Rostam stumbles across him on his travels:

Rostam watched the mare go by, and when he saw the mammoth-bodied foal he looped his lariat, and said, "Keep that foal back from the herd." The old herdsman who had brought the horses said, "My lord, you can't take other people's horses." Rostam asked who owned the horse, since its rump bore no trace of any brand. The herdsman said, "Don't look for a brand, but there are many tales told about this horse. No one knows who owns him; we call him 'Rostam's Rakhsh', and that's all I know." (Davis 184)

What miracle could make him come across a horse who is already referred to as his own? Like a pair of lovers, it seems like the match between horse and rider is made by an underlying benevolent force. Like the Buraq who is not bought with money but chooses to serve the Prophet of its own free will, this horse, Rakhsh, has no price:

He asked the herdsman, "Who knows the price of this dragon?" The herdsman replied, "If you are Rostam, then mount him and defend the land of Iran. The price of this horse is Iran itself, and mounted on his back you will be the world's savior." Rostam's coral lips smiled, and he said, "It is God who does such good works." (Davis 185)

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<sup>102</sup> Literal meaning "Luminous."



The story of Khusrau's meeting with his steed, Shabdiz, also has an unmistakable air of the magical. When Khusrau accidentally led his horse into a peasant's vineyard, the horse trampled over the grapes and destroyed his crops. His father, incensed, had both Khusrau and his horse gravely punished: the horse lost its hooves and Khusrau lost his throne. However, Khusrau's fortune smiles after his grandfather foretells the meeting of Khusrau with Shabdiz:

“In place of what you have lost, you will receive four things of greater worth: you shall ride Shabdiz, the world's swiftest and most fabled steed, who will shake his mane to your glory across a mighty empire bordered by the seas; you shall sit on Taqdis, the throne of thrones, which makes your throne surrendered but a bench; at your bidding Barbad the musician shall play and with the lightest touch will far surpass the broken notes of your lost minstrel. But beyond all those, you shall have Shirin, your destined love, whose sweetness and beauty will sustain you all your days.” (Chelkowski 22)

The foretelling of Khusrau's meeting with Shabdiz is coupled with the foretelling of his journey to love and rulership, cementing the horse's vital role in his future achievements. Just as the Buraq begins the Prophet's journey to the Divine, Shabdiz begins Khusrau's journey to his beloved Shirin. When Nizami adds the ode to the Buraq at the end of *Khusrau va Shirin*, he makes it clear that there is in fact a connection between Shabdiz and the Buraq. These steeds, one “the luminous” (the literal meaning of Shabdiz) and the other “the lightning” (the literal meaning of Buraq), guide their riders on a path to unity with the one who is most beloved to them.

In *Khusrau va Shirin* there is Rakhsh, in the *Gulshan-I Ishq* there is a dervish, and in *Laila va Majnun*, there are the animals. The archetype of a spiritual helper changes between texts, whether a steed, dervish, or otherwise. As Northrop Frye emphasizes in his *Archetypal Criticism*, the exact form of an archetype is flexible (*Anatomy* 143). What is of importance is not the form, but the presence of a helper. These helpers echo Sufi practices by playing a similar role to the Sufi sheikh that a Sufi initiate must follow in order to become a dervish. Thus the Buraq embodies the concept of the Spiritual Helper through its allusions to the imagery of romantic epics.



FIGURE 25 PRINCESS MADHUMALATI MEETS PRINCE MANOHAR IN A GARDEN PAVILION. 1743 DECCAN INDIA, FROM THE GULSHAN-I ISHQ BY NUSRATI. PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILAMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/OBJECT/338669](https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338669).

Once Manohar made his way through the forest, he passed from the untamed wilderness into a pristine garden where he found his love, Madhumalati. This garden is the picture of heaven: *Jannah*, the Arabic word for heaven, can be translated as “paradise” or “garden.” The Qur’an and Muslim culture are replete with garden imagery<sup>103</sup>. The Joy Bestowing (*Farah Bakhsh*) garden that Manohar reaches features an orderly arrangement of plants and trees in the *chahar bagh* fashion (an Indo-Persian style long associated with heaven), coming in great contrast to the dark chaos of the forest. It seems Manohar finally made his ascent to the heavenly realm: after surmounting many challenges, the lovers were finally united and allowed to marry. With a “poetic description of marriage and the journey to the beloved’s land,” the story “signifies the ascent to a paradise of eternal love” (Behl, *Subtle Magic* 28). Just like the Isra and Mi’raj where the Prophet went to heaven and back within his lifetime, meeting God and then choosing to return to earth, Manohar kept his connection to Madhumalati but returned to his own kingdom. As he returns from the symbolic garden of heaven to the duniya (world) of his kingdom, he completes the cycle of the story. Having been transformed by his journey, he is allowed to attain union with Madhumalati.

The characters of all three romances completed their ascensions in their own way<sup>104</sup>, finding their beloveds and entering into a loving relationship, just like the loving relationship every Muslim aspires to have with God<sup>105</sup>. The journey through the wilderness, with the help of the characters’ spiritual guides, allowed them to “awaken and gradually purify base human desire (shauq/kama) into divine love,” fulfilling the ultimate “goal of the Sufi romances” (Burchett, *Genealogy* 95).

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<sup>103</sup> For example, the *chaharbagh* (literally: four garden) garden style common in Iran, South Asia, and much of the Islamic World began to be understood as an Islamic Garden after the first Mughal emperor, Babur (d. 1530), described it as such in the *Baburnama*.

<sup>104</sup> Though Majnun and Laila both die before being able to consummate their love, this death is symbolic of a union with God. Seyed-Gohrab describes that the union with God (often described as *fanaa*) is a death before death; as you “die before you die,” you remove the “I-ness” that cements your separation from God (139). In this way, their deaths serve as a literary symbol for union.

<sup>105</sup> The Prophet’s relationship with God was beyond what other humans could attain: while Sufi practitioners may have been permitted to make an *isra* and *mi’raj* in their own minds, as Ibn al-Arabi did, only the Prophet was permitted to enter the heavens in his bodily form; even other prophets did not have the privilege to see God on God’s throne as Muhammad did.



FIGURE 26 MANOHAR AND MADHUMALATI TAKING LEAVE AT THE SEASIDE EN ROUTE TO MANOHAR'S FUTURE KINGDOM. 1743 DECCAN INDIA, FROM THE GULSHAN-I ISHQ BY NUSRATI. PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART, [HTTPS://WWW.PHILAMUSEUM.ORG/COLLECTION/OBJECT/338829](https://www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/338829).

The concept of the love-quest was widely shared across the Muslim world, but stories like the *Gulshan-I Ishq* tailor these ideas specifically to the experiences of Deccani Indians in their time. Deccani Sufi leaders used a process of translation to bring concepts that would have been limited to a Persian, Arabic, or Sanskrit speaking elite to a greater public through storytelling in vernacular languages<sup>106</sup>. Tales in the Madhumalati cycle were primarily transmitted verbally by Sufi masters in a way that blends entertainment and education, using storytelling to convert esoteric concepts into a digestible narrative form. Similarly, the Buraq paintings take from Persian, Indian, and other Muslim traditions to convey meaning in the visual form. Behl describes how “audiences would have understood and enjoyed the sly and constant allusions and hints of spiritual and erotic meanings, the scary demons and seductive women, the adventures and fights, the exotic landscapes, and the conventional set pieces” of Sufi stories (Behl, *Subtle Magic* 21-22). In the same way, a viewer of the Buraq paintings could equally appreciate the visual drama of the composite image and the myriad of religious and literary allusions contained within the compositions. As audiences enjoyed the entertainment aspects of art and literature, they could begin to understand esoteric concepts through their own emotional experience. Both epic romances and visual art could bridge the gap between Islamic philosophy and a visceral experience of divine love by harnessing the faculty of imagination.

An impatient viewer can capture an entire journey in one image; as they admire the painting, they can contemplate the Buraq and the animals within it to imagine their own spiritual journey. The lightning-fast Buraq<sup>107</sup> speeds up this journey for those with an excessive love and desire for the divine. It is not essential to have a Sufi guide to progress on a spiritual journey; however, it does make it much faster and easier<sup>108</sup>. In most traditions, the Buraq is only said to bring the Prophet to Jerusalem, not all the way to the heavens. Technically, the Prophet could have walked on his own two legs to reach there. As we know, Moses travelled a similar distance on his journey from Egypt to Israel, but it took him years and years. Yes, the Prophet could have walked to Jerusalem, but it would have taken him much longer than a ride on a flying steed, and he likely would have gotten

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<sup>106</sup> As Aditya Behl tells us, they “redefined Indian notions [...] in order to translate cosmology and metaphysics into narratives in a local language” (*Subtle Magic* 16). Though he is speaking here of the *Chandayana*, it would likely also be true of the *Gulshan-I Ishq*.

<sup>107</sup> The literal meaning of *Buraq* is *lightning*.

<sup>108</sup> For example, the protagonist of Ibn Sina’s allegory, *Hay ibn Yaqzan*, reaches a perfect understanding of the divine without having any contact with Muslims or the Prophets. See Hughes for more on this allegory.

lost on the way, just as Moses had. What the Buraq did was accelerate that journey, allowing the Prophet to travel as fast as lightning.

In the Buraq composite images, the complexities of the spiritual journey are condensed into a visual representation capable of being witnessed in a single glance. This “refined chaos” (Sims 68), like a spiritual guide, helps viewers make sense of a wild animal landscape. This landscape becomes a beautiful, unified image that expresses the *tawhid* (unity) of God. In the stories I have analysed, the helper who aids the hero in finding their beloved often recedes to the background. In the Buraq images, helpers along the spiritual journey are brought from the background to the foreground, recognising the essential role they play in spiritual development.

## CONCLUSION

The Deccani Buraq paintings are amazing examples of Islamic visual art; however, they have not had any long-form analysis until now. With relatively little work on Islamic visual art of the Deccan, understanding these paintings poses a considerable challenge. Without specific information about the paintings' authors and patrons, I had to cast a wide net to dig for possible interpretations of their unique imagery. Therefore, I proceed step-by-step through an iconological analysis of the paintings, beginning by identifying the many animal elements in the composite image to find avenues for interpretation. Without any bestiaries or dictionaries of symbols available, I turn to a selection of Persian and Urdu literature popular in the Medieval Deccan to piece together cultural understandings of animal imagery as they fit into an Islamic religious context. I begin by interpreting the most unique element of the painting: the dragon's head tail, and then move to an interpretation of the other animal elements in the body of the Buraq.

Through my analysis of three Persian-language texts, I conclude that the primary function of dragons in Indo-Persian literature is to highlight the positive attributes of the hero's character. The dragon manifests as an obstacle along the hero's journey that he must slay in order to prove his bravery and continue on to complete a quest. This apparently secular function of dragon imagery then fits into a religious ethic when the hero's journey is understood as a parable for a religious quest. In a spiritual journey, the dragon becomes an embodiment of the negative aspects of the ego, or *nafs*, of a spiritual seeker, and by slaying the *nafs*, the hero purifies his soul to make him worthy of a spiritual journey. This spiritual journey can be conceptualized as an analog of the Prophet's Isra and Mi'raj journey, thus explaining the dragon's appearance in an image of the Buraq, the Prophet's flying steed.

Furthermore, I continue the notion of the spiritual journey in my interpretation of the intertwined animal imagery within the Buraq bodies. I connect this spiritual journey specifically to Sufi practice as I connect the animal menagerie to the wild animals in romantic epics that are commonly understood as Sufi allegories. In these allegories, the hero journeys through a wilderness in order to unite with a beautiful woman who, as the hero's beloved, is representative of God. This quest mirrors the ultimate goal of many Sufi communities: union with God. However, before achieving this union, a Sufi practitioner must go through a period of hardship, just as the

heroes of Indo-Persian epic romances must struggle through an unfamiliar forest before reaching their Beloveds. This forest of hardship is filled with animals similar to those in the Buraq composite animals.

The spiritual journey of a spiritual practitioner can be understood as a *Personal Mir'aj*, where each individual has the opportunity to experience God directly, while still living in the physical, earthly world, just as the Prophet Muhammad was privileged to have an audience with God as he reached the highest level of heaven on the night of Isra and Mi'raj. Through their connections to Mir'aj allegories, the Deccani Buraqs assimilate the many stages of the Personal Mir'aj into one body. But if the animals within the body of the Buraq encapsulate the spiritual journey, what does the Buraq itself represent? What is the animal's role in the Personal Mi'raj? The Buraq was the Prophet's vehicle for reaching Jerusalem from which he is able to ascend to the heavens. Similarly, the heroes in the romantic epics require the help of wild animals, a steed, or a dervish along the way to facilitate their journey to their beloveds. The Buraq is the archetype of the helper along the Personal Mi'raj. Was the Buraq able to enter into an audience with God? No. That was the Prophet's privilege alone. However, the Buraq was a significant help to the Prophet by accelerating his journey to the heavens. Similarly, a Sufi *pir* or spiritual guide cannot accompany a Sufi initiate on their journey to oneness with God. Nevertheless, they can help their followers by being a vehicle to accelerate their journey along the spiritual path.

The experience of oneness with God that Sufis strove for was beyond description. Laypeople may strain to understand what this experience is like or how to get there. Therefore, the Sufi *pir* seeks to translate the reality of that experience into a form that their disciple may understand. One of the most effective tools of translation, commonly used in the South Asian Sufi context, was the allegory<sup>109</sup>, such as the love story *Gulshan-I Ishq*. The image of the Buraq, like the Sufi romances, serves as a visual allegory. By bringing esoteric concepts of union with God into a visual form experienced through the senses, namely the sense of sight, the Buraq painting serves as a bridge between the theory of the Personal Mir'aj and the practice that leads to its experience.

I hope that this study of Buraq imagery in the Islamic Deccan helps future scholars better understand the connections between Buraq symbolism and Sufi power structures that serve to

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<sup>109</sup> For more information on the use of allegory in Islamic Philosophy, see Alfred L. Ivry's "The Utilization of Allegory in Islamic Philosophy."



provide an alternative interpretation of the Buraq in Medieval South Asian visual art. However, though I have unveiled possible meanings behind the Buraq images, what is yet to be revealed is their use in Deccani Muslim communities. The format of these paintings as relatively large, freestanding images rather than book illustrations as well as their icon-like qualities suggest that they may have been used differently than typical Indo-Persian manuscripts. Could the images have been used as a tool for meditation? Could they have had a role in Sufi practice? Or could their icon-like appearance have connections to Hindu practices? As of yet, there is not sufficient information to conclude. Therefore, I hope that future scholars will continue working on the Buraq composite images to uncover the complexities of visual culture in Islamic societies.

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## APPENDIX

### APPENDIX I: NOTE ON DATES

In this thesis, I use dates with the A.D. (Anno Domini) and B.C. (Before Christ) system. I have opted for the Gregorian calendar over the Hijri calendar as it is the most recognized calendar in Canada and most familiar to scholars in the English-speaking world. Though C.E. (Common Era) and B.C.E. (Before Common Era) nomenclature has started to replace A.D. and B.C. as it asserts Western secularism by erasing Christian heritage, I have opted out of using this system as I do not recognize the birth of Jesus Christ as the beginning of a “common era.” The Gregorian Calendar is just one amongst many. Therefore, it should not be considered any more legitimate or universal than the Hijri system, which dates from the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslim community’s migration from Mecca to Medina, nor any other calendar system. By using A.D. and B.C., I adopt a system that is easily understandable to Western scholars, but also acknowledges the specific and unique Christian heritage of the Western world. If neither B.C. nor A.D. is written, A.D. can be assumed.

### APPENDIX II: NOTE ON SPELLING

As this thesis refers to the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Muslim tradition, there are a number of possible ways to spell, capitalize, and transliterate terms originating in other languages. A number of the terms I will be referring to can be considered *foreign*. However, a number of words with Arabic origins (Qur’an, hadith, etc.) have become so common in English usage, especially within the Muslim community, that I consider them English words. Nevertheless, the spelling of these indigenised Arabic terms is not standardised in the community. For most Arabic-origin words, I will be using the transliteration system found in the popular Arabic learning textbook, *Alif Baa* (found on pages 9 to 11). Persian-origin words are transliterated using the Persian transliteration system from the Association for Iranian Studies. Foreign words, except those that have been indigenised into English, will be italicized for their first use only. Additionally, I use the words Qu’ran and Buraq as proper nouns, and thus they are capitalized; hadith is not a proper

noun and thus is not capitalized unless written as “Qu’ran and Hadith,” referring to the two as one corpus.

### APPENDIX III: TIMELINE OF EMPIRES AND DYNASTIES OF THE DECCAN

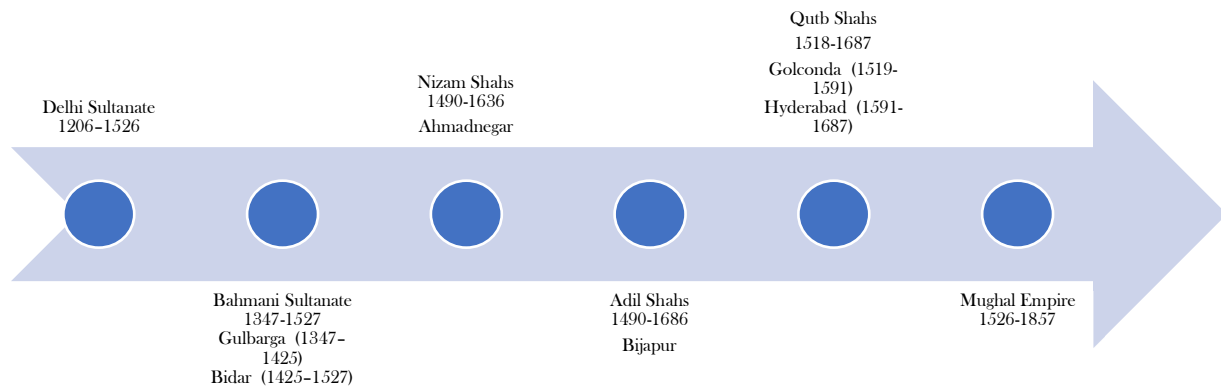


FIGURE 27 TIMELINE OF EMPIRES AND DYNASTIES OF THE DECCAN

### APPENDIX IV: DESCRIPTION OF THE BURQA IN NIZAMI

Unfortunately, Nizami’s poem of the Buraq in *Khusrau va Shirin* has never been translated into English. However, I am able to include here a list of its descriptions of the Buraq’s physical characteristics. As I am not a native speaker of Persian, I enlisted the help of Sajad Soleymani Yazidi, a graduate student, scholar of Iranian literature, and native Persian speaker at the University of Alberta. His summary of the physical characteristics of the Buraq from “The Miraj of the Prophet,” Chapter 118 of *Khusrau va Shirin*, are enumerated on the following page.

1. Its character is like the light from lightning
2. Its body is florid as a scene from a garden
3. Its head is devoid of contempt; its foreleg devoid of branding
4. It's more bountiful than the clouds in the month of Nisan (Assyrian month corresponding to March-April -- which means that its colour is like the clouds)
5. It's tamer than the winds in a rose-garden
6. Its saddle is a sea of jewels
7. Nobody has nor will ever dare to ride it
8. Its back is strong
9. Its horseshoes are heavy
10. Its stride is light
11. Its pace is just as quick as its eyesight is strong.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Details obtained from email conversation with Sajad Soleymani Yazidi.