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Decoding Mughal Realities: A Thematic Study of Baswan's Portraits in Akbar's Era with Psychological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into Baswan's creative accomplishments as a famous court painter during Emperor Akbar's reign, using a theme analysis of his portraiture. It looks into how Baswan's paintings not only represent individual physiologies and personalities, but also serve as visual chronicle of Mughal sociopolitical reality. Using a qualitative thematic approach enhanced with psychological perspectives, the study decodes the rich symbolism, cultural references, and narrative tactics found in his works. The selected paintings are examined for their depictions of imperial power, religious plurality, intellectualism, and human emotion—all of which were important values at Akbar's court. According to the study, Baswan's pictures served a purpose other than aesthetic appreciation; they helped to shape and spread Akbar's ideological and political worldview. Baswan created a vivid visual rhetoric that contributed to the wider Mughal effort of empire-building and identity creation by paying close attention to detail, spatial organization, psychological symbolism, and expressive line work. This article portrays Baswan not just as an artist, but also as a visual history of Akbar's transforming age.

KEY WORDS

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant in both the art historical and cultural worlds because it sheds light on Baswan, a relatively unknown figure in Mughal painting, and his thematic contributions to portraiture. While much has been said about the splendor of Mughal miniatures. This research contributes to a better understanding of how portraiture functioned not only as a medium of likeness but also as a means of imperial message. By focusing on Baswan's subject choices and stylistic advances, the book adds to current scholarship on Mughal visual culture, notably how art linked with governance, diversity, and knowledge production under Akbar. It also offers a framework for examining historical portraiture as a potent narrative device.

INTRODUCTION

Basawan was one of the most accomplished and talented artists of Akbar's atelier. He was a Hindu by religion and belonged to an Indian caste traditionally composed of shepherds and farmers. He was trained by the Persian masters Mir Sayyid Ali and Khwaja Abd al-Samad, whose influence can be found in his work (Seyller, 1997). However, he was open to foreign influences, which he accepted from European engravings of Flemish and German origin. He was inspired by their painting but never copied them exactly. Instead, he painted them in his own distinctive style, and one could not guess that it had been inspired by a foreign model (Goswamy, 2012). There is a certain gracefulness to his work emphasized by his innate talent for rendering harmonious and well-balanced compositions in which every subject is perfectly proportioned. His line has a fluidity that exhibits his control of the brush, and his compositions are often severe with a theatrical quality.

He was ranked fourth on the list of seventeen best painters in the Kitab-Khana by Abul Fazl (Fazl, 1921). Basawan never worked as a mere colourist, except during his early days when new artists were usually assigned such roles. He was responsible for drawing and laying out the composition or tarkh in a miniature due to his exceptional draftsmanship. His work can be seen

in two of the oldest manuscripts of Mughal art: the Hamzanama and the Tutinama (Verma, 1994). In the Tutinama, two miniatures carry Basawan's name, while two others can be attributed to him based on stylistic features. These early works exhibit a certain hesitance and heaviness, reflecting the youthful artist's development. The Tutinama, a collection of Persian tales based on an ancient Sanskrit text, includes many fantastical animal narratives, which, though mythical, are treated with stylistic coherence and reflect foreign influences.

The prevailing aesthetic of the time emphasized ornamentation, but Basawan encouraged greater naturalism (Beach, 1981). His treatment of animals followed a distinctly Indian style they were depicted with ease in Indian surroundings and appeared remarkably natural. Although not primarily an animal painter, he clearly took delight in painting them and created numerous animal studies throughout his career. One such work is the independent miniature A Family of Cheetahs, where the landscape, though Persian in influence, is rendered with greater realism. His tremendous drawing skills and his ability to dramatize natural forms are both stunning and mysterious (Losty, 1974).

During Basawan's time, it was common practice in the atelier for two or three artists to collaborate on a single miniature. Prominent artists such as Mansur and Hussein had the honor of working as colorists under Basawan's supervision (Kumar, 2018). He often introduced bold and unexpected touches to his work, making it more intriguing. His imagination and inspiration together allowed him to achieve remarkable artistic results. In The Flight of Simurgh he depicts a mythical bird amidst lush vegetation. The subject, drawn from Nizami's Haft Paykar, is treated with a dreamlike and mysterious atmosphere, showcasing his sensitivity to both form and mood.

Basawan contributed significantly to the Akbarnama, for which many colorists assisted him. His style in these miniatures is dramatic, with compositions that are strong and energetic. The painting Akbar Riding the Mad Elephant Hawai is among the most sensational works in the Akbarnama, notable for its realism and sensitivity. Basawan, being deeply religious, also enjoyed painting Hindu subjects such as ascetics and hermits. His work Hosein Qulij Khan Presents Prisoners of War from Gujrat assisted by Mansur, reflects his ability to accurately render historical scenes with sharp memory and keen observation (Beach & Koch, 1997).

He was so inspired by the European *grisaille* technique (monochrome grey painting) that he developed the Nim-qalam technique sketches rendered in black ink with fine brushes and occasionally enhanced with colour washes. This technique, influenced by Western methods, allowed him to create depth and volume with realistic results (Chandra, 1992). His talent as a portraitist was equally remarkable. He was interested in psychological portraiture and brought a level of expressiveness to this genre that distinguished him from others. This expressive quality also appears in his fauna paintings, where spontaneous and unfiltered impressions are captured with immediacy.

One of his masterpieces is *A Miserable Horse, Man and Dog* a rare subject in Mughal painting. Symbolic in content, the depiction of the emaciated figures reflects his deep understanding of anatomy and expression. Painted with great empathy, this work shows Basawan at the height of his artistic maturity and influence during the late 1580s (Verma, 1994).

MAIN OBJECTIVES ARE:

1. To recognize the visual characteristics of Baswan's portraits.
2. To analyze the recurring themes such as line, color, scene, subject matter, composition and techniques.
3. To evaluate the extent to which Baswan's portraits influenced the psychological and stylistic evolution of later Mughal painting.

METHODOLOGY

The current study is based on a qualitative research design with a thematic analysis technique. This method aids in the identification of symbolic meanings and repeating themes in Baswan's depictions, such as power, identity, and naturalism. It enables a thorough knowledge that extends beyond simply describing the photographs, such as recognizing the main subject, color, technique, line, composition, and overall scene. Four genuine paintings were selected for detailed investigation from the Akbarnama, Bahar al-Hayat, and Razmnama illustrated folios. These works' high-resolution pictures are used to investigate themes like as color, shape, and subject.

The obtained data is documented for future use in analysis. Below is the thematic interpretation of the chose paintings of painter Baswan.

DESCRIPTION

This painting(fig: 1), shows a clear Persian influence, from the subject matter to the treatment of the rocks (Goswamy, 2012). The scene has been set in a lush green landscape—a vibrant island situated within a sea. Birds are perched on trees throughout the island. The surrounding water, both in the foreground and background, contains various aquatic creatures including large and small fish, as well as turtles. Perspective is not maintained consistently, as the fish in the background appear larger than those in the foreground. The scales on these fish are meticulously rendered, and a curved thick red line indicates the slit behind their eyes.

BASAWAN THE FLIGHT OF THE SIMURGH C1590

Thematic Table: Visual Analysis of Painting	
Code	Thematic Details
Color	Green (landscape), Yellow, Pink, White dark Brown, Red and - Pink hues.
Lines	Curved and motion
Scene	Flying mode
Technique	detailed textures and fluid use of lines

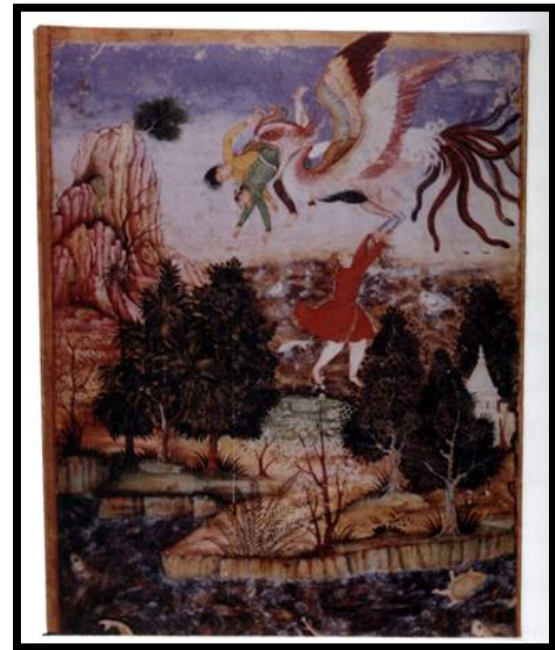


Figure.I:

Source:<https://www.google.com/search?q=the+flight+of+the+simurgh>

Strokes around the fish in the water suggest movement either the upward thrust as they surface or the dive into the depths. Some fish are shown only partially: with heads or curved bodies and

tails breaking the surface. The large mythological bird in the upper right corner of the painting is a Simurgh. This creature, rooted in Arab-Persian mythology, is a common motif in Persian painting and literature (Canby, 2009). It is a vibrant bird resembling a cock, with an expression of fury marked by rounded, pale eyes. Its large wings feature green, yellow, pink, dark brown, and white feathers. The body is furry, with strong wings and a dark brown patch between them. Its neck, underside, and the upper part of the legs are painted light pink, while a smooth, black patch appears on its lower belly. The Simurgh's dark brown tail feathers curl in dynamic directions, and it has a green beak, a reddish-pink face, three crest-like curls on its head, and wind-blown feathers behind the head, suggesting motion. Its strong grey legs have sharp claws. The bird holds two men in its beak, dangling helplessly as they attempt to escape, while a third man clings desperately to its feet in an effort to rescue them.

A FAMILY OF CHEETAH -C1575-80-BA5A WAN

Thematic Table: Visual Analysis of Painting	
Code	Description/Thematic Details
Color	Yellowish-brown, black and Pink tongue.
Line	Curved and Diagonal lines
Scene	Natural jungle habitat
Technique	Diagonal composition develops movement and communication



Figure.II:Source:<https://www.sanctuarynaturefoundation.org/article/the-story-of-india%E2%80%99s-cheetahs>

This painting (fig:2) ,shows a family of cheetahs in their natural habitat a jungle. The landscape is

rocky, featuring greenery and a Persian-style tree with knotty branches. In the lower left corner, water rushes downward with visible force, creating waves likely caused by submerged rocks. Two small black birds perch on the tree's branches, suggesting the coexistence of various life forms alongside these majestic animals. The male cheetah is seated among the rocks near the middle-right margin of the composition, with its forelimbs crossed, evoking calm and resting posture. Its gaze is protective and affectionate, directed toward its family. Unlike other Mughal miniatures that depict wild beasts in moments of aggression, this image highlights a more naturalistic and peaceful portrayal of animal behavior (Beach, 1981).

In the lower central part of the composition, the female cheetah and her four cubs are engaged in various activities. Her curved spine and narrow waist are rendered with anatomical accuracy. The spotted patterns of the cheetah's yellowish-brown coats adorned with black markings—are skillfully differentiated in size and distribution. Light falls from the left side of the miniature, illuminating the tree trunk, rocks, and cheetahs uniformly. The female's tail lies curled beside her feet, ending in a bushy tip with a striped and dark-colored texture. She appears content but alert, licking one of her cubs, who is seated on a nearby rock, enjoying the gesture. Her small yet sharp ears indicate alertness, and her open mouth reveals a pink tongue and pointed teeth. Another cub is nestled beneath her, suckling milk with its head tilted upward. The remaining two cubs run toward the water in playful motion. Their rounded bodies and underdeveloped muscles give them a kitten-like appearance.

This subject is rare and remarkably engaging. The artist may have taken significant risks to make such direct observations, later translated into this composition. Cheetahs are known for their unpredictable and swift nature, and their sharp senses. The diagonal composition lends a dynamic sense of movement to the scene (Verma, 1994). The painting exemplifies the Mughal interest in naturalistic representation and the artist's close study of real animal behavior, particularly evident in Basawan's work.

AKBAR HUNTING TIGERS NEAR NARWAR-D590-BASAWAN- AKBARNAMA

Code	Description/Thematic Details
Color	Pink, Brown - Jewel-toned dress and red palki work.
Line	Strong diagonal and - Curved lines
Scene	Historical event
Technique	Dramatic storytelling within a single pictorial frame



Figure.III:Source:<https://www.google.com/search?q=AKBAR+HUNTING+TIGERS+NEAR+NARWAR>

This (fig: 3), is a historical event from Akbar's life, recorded in his biography by Abul Fazl. To the right side of the miniature, close to the margins in the upper corner, is the imperial procession of elephants, horses, and men. The horses are luxuriously adorned with jewels and fine textiles, indicating that their owner is the emperor of a wealthy kingdom. A red-colored carriage or *palki* on the back of an elephant signifies a space reserved for the emperor or royal women. The entire royal entourage is shown witnessing the event.

Near the center of the composition is Akbar, mounted on a horse, delivering a powerful blow that cuts through the neck of a large lion .The lion is rendered in a pink tone with stripes a curious and somewhat symbolic color choice, deviating from naturalistic norms (Goswamy, 2012). Akbar's horse, a graceful brown steed, is adorned with a lavishly decorated bridle. In the foreground, three lion cubs are engaged in fierce combat with royal attendants. A white cub lies slain near Akbar, blood oozing from its mouth and a fatal wound visible on its abdomen. Another

cub of brown color wrestles violently with a man attempting to subdue it, while the third, near the lower margin, has been killed by a man who has driven a dagger into its back.

The entire scene is engulfed in chaos and fear, capturing the moment of unexpected confrontation with wild beasts. Abul Fazl describes the event vividly:

“When (Akbar's) crescent standards cast their rays on the territory appertaining to the fort of Narwar. A tiger such as might terrify the leopard of heaven came out of the forest with five cubs and onto the track by which the cavalcade was proceeding. His Majesty, the Shahinshah... attacked the brute and killed it by one stroke of his sword... The wild beast so great and terrible fell bleeding to the dust before the strength of his arm and the might of his courage” (Fazl, 1921, p. 287).

The miniature is highly dramatic, narrating the entire episode in a single frame. While the movement and postures of the lion and cubs are well observed, the overall depiction lacks the realism found in the works of painters like Miskin, who specialized in naturalistic details (Verma, 1994). Nevertheless, the artist brings a sense of three-dimensionality and vitality to the subjects. He uses European-style shading to give volume to the forms but avoids the stark chiaroscuro typical of Western painting.

BUFFALO AND MULEYOKED TO THE DRIVING SHAFT OF A WATER WHEEL- C1600-10-BASAWAN

Thematic Table: Visual Analysis of Painting	
Code	Description/Thematic Details
Color	Contrast of white and dark mule
Line	Diagonal, curve and rhythmic lines

Scene	Realistic representation of animal labor in village life.
Technique	Harmonized movement taken mid-action



Figure.IV:Source:<https://www.google.com/search?q=BUFFALO+AND+MULEYOKED+TO+THE+DRIVING+SHAFT+OF+A+WATER+WHEEL>

This (fig: 4), is a genre subject, commonly seen in the villages of India and Pakistan. Typically, yoked oxen or buffaloes are used for this purpose, but in this particular scene, a mule is yoked alongside a buffalo to the driving shaft of a water wheel or Persian wheel. This traditional method of irrigation is used to draw water from a well for agricultural fields. As the animals move in a circular path, water is mechanically lifted from the well. The diagonally placed animals indicate their forward motion and the immense effort required to pull the heavy equipment.

The mule appears slender and less robust, as suggested by its thin features, while the buffalo is strong and hefty, with a visible hump and muscular form. The white buffalo contrasts visually with the dark mule. The buffalo's curled tail, lifted toward its back, appears in motion—likely swatting away flies. Its ears are relatively small, while the mule has large, upright ears and an elongated face characteristic features of its species. Both animals have raised their right forelimbs in synchronized motion, caught in a dynamic moment just before exiting the pictorial

frame. On the left side of the miniature, a swarm of bees ascends, their small transparent wings fluttering and producing a buzzing sound (Okada, 1992).

CONCLUSION

Baswan's portraits are significant milestones in Mughal art history. He contributed to the realism of imperial iconography by paying close attention to particular face features, nuanced gestures, and realistic spatial situations. A thematic examination of his surviving writings reveals repeated attempts to strike a balance between rigorous courtly hierarchy and a growing interest in personal individuality. These findings indicate that Baswan was more than just an accomplished illustrator; he was a deliberate developer of Akbar's political image, as well as a pioneer whose approaches influenced succeeding Mughal portraitists. Future research can broaden this framework to include other painters in the studio, offering further light on how individual artists collaborated to build the Mughal visual language.

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