

## Lives that cannot be told

Shaghayegh Ghasemi

University of Calgary.

[shaghayegh.ghasemi1@ucalgary.ca](mailto:shaghayegh.ghasemi1@ucalgary.ca)

**Abstract:** Children appear frequently in Persianate sources, including Timurid chronicles, travel narratives, and miniatures, but they rarely develop as sustained narrative subjects. This article argues that childhood's marginality stems from structural limitations of historical narration rather than evidentiary absence. It proposes three thresholds: visibility as representational presence, intelligibility as recognition within meaning systems, and narratability as sustained subjecthood across causal sequences. Examination of Yazdi's *Zafarnama*, Samarqandi's *Matla al-Sadayn*, Clavijo and Ibn Battuta's accounts, and miniatures such as *Khusraw in the Royal Camp* and *Layla and Majnun at School* demonstrates that narratability centers on authority figures who generate temporal continuity. Children remain consistently present and occasionally legible in specific roles, yet they seldom achieve ongoing narrative subjecthood. The framework reveals historiography's selectivity, where structural criteria shape narratable lives beyond mere content selection, privileging continuity-generating subjects over dependent ones.

## Introduction

Some people appear in history as main characters whose lives keep being followed over time, while others appear only once and then disappear. Historians usually explain this by saying that some records are lost or not available. This paper argues that it is more about how history is written, not just about missing documents.

Children are everywhere in premodern Persianate sources: Timurid chronicles mention them during wars, travel stories show them in families, and miniatures draw them in royal camps and schools. Yet they almost never become people whose lives are followed over time. They are seen and counted, but they are not kept in the story. Instead of asking only, "are children present?", this paper asks: "when do children become real narrative subjects?". It uses three tools: visibility, intelligibility, and narratability.

The article uses the ideas of White, Foucault, Hanaoka, and Butler. White says that historians often write like writers of novels or tragedies, and they prefer clear cause-and-effect stories (White, 1973). Foucault shows that who is allowed to be seen and understood depends on power and discourse (Foucault, 1975). Hanaoka studies how Persian chronicles focus on kings and dynasties and ignore others (Hanaoka, 2016). Butler explains that some lives, even if they are seen, are treated as unimportant, especially dependent ones like children (Butler, 2009).

Timurid and Persianate materials are used as examples. Chronicles talk mostly about rulers, while people and groups are put together in a simple way. Travel stories show more details, but they do not follow people over time. Miniatures put

kings and main characters in the center, and push children to the sides.

## Methodology

This study uses a comparative approach that combines close reading of texts with visual analysis of images. It works mainly with three types of Persianate sources: Timurid chronicles, travel narratives, and illustrated manuscripts. The main texts are Sharaf al Din Ali Yazdi's *Zafarnama* and Abd al Razzaq Samarqandi's *Matla al Saydayn*, which represent court historiography; the travel accounts of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo and Ibn Battuta; and miniature paintings from the *Khamsa* tradition, such as scenes from *Khusraw in the Royal Camp* and *Layla and Majnun at School*.

The analysis focuses on three main ideas: visibility (do children appear at all?), intelligibility (can we understand their role?), and narratability (do they stay in the story and affect what happens next?). In the texts, it looks at whether children appear as named individuals or as part of an unnamed group, what roles they are given, and whether they stay in the story across different events. In the miniatures, it examines how the composition, such as size, position, direction of gaze, and relation to the main figures, affects the way children are seen and treated in the visual story. By comparing texts and images, the study also checks whether the limits on children's narratability come from the nature of each medium or from wider structural patterns that are shared by both writing and painting.

In texts, the study sees whether children are named individuals or just part of a group, whether they have clear roles, and whether they return later in the story. In images, it looks at size, position, direction of gaze, and how they are placed in relation to the main characters.

## Theoretical Framework

Historians do not just record what happens; they choose, order, and shape events into stories. White shows that historians use forms like romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire and prefer clear cause-and-effect (White, 1973). Foucault adds that power and discourse decide who and what can be seen and understood (Foucault, 1975).

In Persian chronicles, Hanaoka shows that rulers are kept in the center by using genealogies and talk of divine favor (Hanaoka, 2016). People who are not part of the royal family, including children, may appear for a moment, but they do not become full characters with a life story.

Using these three ideas, children are often easy to see in texts and images, but their roles are not always clear. Sometimes we can understand them, for example, as heirs or victims, but not in a consistent way. Most importantly, they usually do not stay in the story or shape what happens next. Long, continuous storylines are mostly given to powerful figures, not to children. In this sense, Butler's idea is helpful: not every life that is visible is treated as important, and dependent lives, such as children's, often remain "seen but not really counted" (Butler, 2009).

## Timurid Chronicles

Timurid chronicles focus on power, war, and royal rule. Works like Yazdī's *Zafarnāma* and Samarqandī's *Matla' al-Saydayn* try to show Timur and his family as strong and continuous. Ordinary people and children mostly appear as

groups or crowds, not as individuals. Children are counted in wars or captured groups, but their lives are not followed over time (Samarqandī, 1987, pp. 80–81; Woods, 1987). In contrast, rulers and officials appear again; their choices lead to new events (Samarqandī, 1987, pp. 87–90). Heirs (children of the king) are sometimes treated differently: they are named and mentioned in relation to the royal family, but still not as fully independent characters (Samarqandī, 1987, pp. 120–123; Hanaoka, 2016).

## Travel Narratives

Travel stories give us more details about cities, ceremonies, and daily life. Clavijo's account, for example, describes people's clothes and actions very clearly. Yet, when the story moves on, people disappear and do not return later. Children are part of the background, not central figures.

Ibn Battūta often describes short meetings and conversations with scholars or local people, which gives those figures some meaning, but those stories are still short episodes, not long-life stories (Ibn Battūta, 2003, pp. 28–30). So, travel narratives make children more visible, but they do not give them long, continuous stories.

## Visual Narratives (Miniatures)

Miniatures tell stories by size, position, and direction of gaze. In *Khusraw in the Royal Camp* (see figure 1), the king is in the center, on a high throne, and everyone looks toward him. A child in the corner may be drawn clearly and actively, but they are not connected to the main story. They are visible, but not a main "character."

In *Layla and Majnūn at School* (see figure 2), most attention goes to the teacher and the lovers. Other children around them are just extra figures that add color but do not have their own story. Images and texts work in similar ways: power and authority stay in the middle, and children stay on the margins.



**Figure 1.** *Khusraw in the Royal Camp. Folio from an Unidentified Text; A Ruler Enthroned.* Possibly Khurasan, Iran, c. 1590. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.



**Figure 2.** Nizami. “Laila and Majnun in School,” Folio 129 from a *Khamsa* of Nizami of Ganja. 931 AH / 1524-25 CE. Metropolitan Museum of Art.

## Conclusion

Children appear many times in Persianate sources, but they rarely become real main characters in history. This is not because we know nothing about them; it is because the way historians and artists tell stories favors powerful, independent figures over dependent ones like children. This article uses three ideas, visibility, intelligibility, and narratability, to show how history chooses whose life counts as a “real story.”

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