

An Introduction to Farid Uddin Attar and His Sufi Mysticism with Special Reference to his “Mantiq-ut-Tair”

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Abstract:

The main purpose of the article is to highlight the deep Sufi mysticism specifically examining Farid ud-Din Attar's epic poem, Mantiq-ut-Tair (The Parliament of Birds), as a quintessential example of this genre. It has to be noted that Attar's work is a master class in Sufi allegory and it is being used the journey of birds to a mythical king by name the Simurgh, to represent the human soul's quest for divine union. In this allegorical poem various birds representing mystics, unite themselves under the leadership of the hoopoe in order to journey to the court of the Simurgh, a mysterious bird whose name signifies "thirty birds," dwelling in Mount Kaf, the mountain which encircles the world. At the commencement of the poem there is a long debate between the hoopoe and the other birds, who at first allege various excuses for not undertaking the journey, while he rebukes them for their Luke-warmness, not concealing, however, the fact that the journey is full of peril, and that though many start few will reach the goal. The hoopoe's description of the road is as follows: "We have seven valleys to traverse. The first is the Valley of Search; the second the Valley of Love, which has no limits; the third is the Valley of Knowledge the fourth is the Valley of Independence; the fifth is the Valley of Unity, pure and simple; the sixth is the Valley of Amazement; last of all is the valley of Poverty and Annihilation, beyond which there is no advance. There thou wilt feel thyself drawn, but will have no power to go any further. It has to be mention that Mantiq-ut-Tair is not merely a literary masterpiece but has a profound psychological and theological text and offering timeless insights into the nature of spiritual struggle and the attainment of enlightenment. This is what has been attempting to highlight throughout this article for a wide audience.

Key Words: Limit, Valley, Nature, Feel, Mysterious, Journey, Goal, Spiritual, Allegory

Introduction

Among the Mohammedans Sufism, or Persian mysticism, is known as *tasawwuf*. The word Sufi is derived from Suf, meaning "wool." When a little Persian sect at the end of the eighth century A.D. broke away from the orthodox Muslim religion, and struck out on an independent path, they ignored costly robes and worldly ostentation, and clad themselves in a white wool garment. Hence they were known as "wool wearers," or Sufis. Prof. Edward G. Browne gives four theories in regard to the origin of Sufism, viz.: (1) *Esoteric Doctrine of the Prophet*. (2) *Reaction of the Aryan mind against a Semitic religion*. (3) *Neo-Platonist influence*. (4) *Independent origin*. None of the four theories altogether satisfies the learned professor, and very certain it is that the last-mentioned theory is of very little account. Prof. Browne seems in favor of a spontaneous growth existing in various forms, under various names throughout the civilized world; but after all this is not very tangible evidence¹. Sufism, Taşawwuf, which is the esoteric or inward (*baṭin*) aspect of Islam, is to be distinguished from exoteric or "external" (*ẓahir*) Islam just as direct contemplation of spiritual or divine realities is distinguishable from the fulfilling of the laws which translate them in the individual order in connection with the conditions of a particular phase of humanity².

Sufism is as old as humanity. Traditionally, however, Sufism has been associated with Islam. Although Sufi saints existed even before Prophet Muhammad, but before the Prophet they were not called Sufis. It was only after a few centuries that they were called Sufis. According to Qushayri (988 AD) and some other scholars like Shihabuddin Suhrawardi, the term 'Sufi' was first used at the end of second century Hijri i.e. in the early ninth century AD. The term Sufi did not find a mention either in the *Sihah-i-Sittah* compiled in the 9th and 10th century AD or in the Arabic dictionary, the *Qamus* compiled in the early 15th century AD³.

Mystical awareness was certainly present in the Prophet Mohammad's attitude to Allah, and "mystical" is an entirely appropriate adjective to describe his many experiences of supernatural Presence making contact through him with a message to mankind. The Koran, the book of Allah's revelations to Mohammad, contains numerous passages of a mystical character which the Sufis seized upon eagerly to buttress their own claims to personal trafficking with God⁴. Mysticism is that point of view which claims as its basis an intimate knowledge of the one source and substratum of all existence, a knowledge, which is obtained through a revelatory experience during a rare moment of clarity in contemplation. Those who claim to have actually experienced this direct revelation constitute an elite tradition, which transcends the boundary lines of individual religions,

cultures and languages, and which has existed, uninterrupted, since the beginning of time⁵.

Sufism is the name given to the mystical movement within Islam; a Sufi is a Muslim who dedicates himself to the quest after mystical union (or, better said, reunion) with his Creator. The name is Arabic in origin, being derived from the word *suf* meaning “wool”; the Sufis were distinguishable from their fellows by wearing a habit of coarse woolen cloth, in time when silks and brocades had become the fashion of the wealthy and mundane-minded, symbolic of their renunciation of worldly values and their abhorrence for physical comforts⁶.

Farid al-Din Attar, author of the work by name *Mantiq-ut-Tair* here presented is to be accounted amongst the greatest poets of Persia⁷. “Attar was probably the son of a prosperous chemist, receiving an excellent education in various fields. While his works say little else about his life, they tell us that he practiced the profession of pharmacy and personally attended to a very large number of customers. The people he helped in the pharmacy used to confide their troubles in Attar and this affected him deeply. Eventually, he abandoned his pharmacy store and traveled widely to Baghdad, Basra, Kufa, Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Khwarizm, Turkistan, and India, meeting with Sufi Shaykhs, and returned promoting Sufi ideas”. Attar used to compose almost 45,000 couplets and many brilliant prose works, and his greatest work is the “well-known *Manṭeq ut-ṭayr* (The Parliament of the Birds). This is an allegorical poem describing the quest of the birds (i.e., Sufis) for the mythical Simorgh, or Phoenix, whom they wish to make their king (i.e., God). In the final scene, the birds that have survived the journey, and approached the throne contemplating their reflections in the mirror like countenance of the Simorgh, only to realize that they and the Simorgh are one⁸. The central theme of this ecstatic literature of early Persia Sufism was the yearning of the lover (the mystic) for the Beloved (God), and for a renewal of that intimate union which existed between the two before the dawn of creation⁹.

Literature Review

Attar's great philosophical religious poem, *Mantiq-Ut-Tair*, was composed probably in the second half of the twelfth century A.D. It is a great deal of Sufi Poetry that has been regarded as a masterpiece of classical Persian literature specially focusing on the spiritual journey, transformative love and the annihilation of the self. Attar's language is, compared with that of many Persian poets, fairly direct and does not present too many difficulties. Attar's metaphors are stock comparisons, and his descriptions of beautiful youths and maidens all use the same vocabulary and imagery. This is of course a common device used to unify long narrative poems particularly epics in

many languages. Two other rhetorical devices deserve mention. One is common to a great deal of Persian poetry; the other is more typical of Attar himself.

Objective of the study

1. To highlight Attar's teaching and his poetic works
2. To highlight his biographical and as a pivotal Sufi poet
3. To analyze Mantiq-ut-Tair as an allegorical narrative that highlights the Sufi doctrines
4. To give a brief introduction about Sufism

Methodology

I have gone through a lot of book like composed by Attar , Hafiz and Jaysi like *Mantiq-ut-Tair*, *Padmavat*, *Gulistan* and many more composition by the elite Persian scholars but I am highly attract by the composition of Attar which has enriched Persian literature and full filled its granary by its composition. Attars composition and ideas has been able to provide his mystical philosophy being used Mantiq-ut-Tair as a study to illustrate his approach to Sufism and his compositions' significance in both spiritual thought and Persian literature.

Discussion

Farid Uddin Attar a great Sufi poet of the 12th Century AD who was inspired by master Sufi Poet, Moulana Rumi and a prominent poet of the Seljuk period¹⁰, was born about 1119 A. D., eight years after the death of al-Ghazali, in Nishapur. The name 'Aṭṭar signifies one who deals in 'itr, or otto of roses, and other perfumes, but in its wider significance means a druggist. He, like his father, kept a sort of pharmacy where he was consulted by patients for whom he prescribed, dispensing his own medicines. It was while he was thus engaged in selling perfumes and drugs that the call came to him to follow the religious life. Dawlat Shah, in his Memoirs of the Poets, relates that one day, as he was standing among his bales surrounded by his clerks and servants, a holy anchorite appeared before him at the door, and gazed around with strange wild eyes, fast filling with tears. Faridu'd-Din sharply rebuked him for his seeming curiosity and bade him go away. "That is easily done," said the darwish, "I have little to bear along with me: nothing but this poor habit. But you? When the time comes for you to go away with all this costly merchandise, how will you set about it? You will do well to arrange before that inevitable hour arrives, about the packing up of your treasures." 'Attar was profoundly affected by the words of the darwish and gave up his shop, abandoning his profession and entirely renouncing all his worldly affairs. Entering the monastery of Shaykh Ruknu'd-Din, who was

then one of the most distinguished masters of the contemplative life, he gave himself up wholly to the things of God, so that at the close of his life he is said to have attained "the most perfect degree of spiritual-ity." Finally he met his death at the hands of the Mongol invaders under Chengiz Khan (1229-30 A. D.)

'Aṭṭar must have spent the greater part of a very long life in literary work, for the number of his works is said to have been equal to the number of chapters in the Quran, one hundred and fourteen. But there is much that is legendary in what we read of him and this statement must be an exaggeration, for the number of his writings preserved or mentioned by name hardly exceeds thirty. Of these Tadhkiratu'l-Awliya, the Memoirs of the Saints, is the only one written in prose. The best known of his poetical compositions are the Pandnama, or the Book of Counsels, which is still widely read in the East, and Maṭīqu't-Tayr, or the Discourses of the Birds, which is to be found in various editions, an early European edition being that of Garcin de Tassy (Paris 1857, 1863) with a French translation. The Pandnama is a rather tedious book of maxims but generally speaking 'Attar has a very clear style and shows considerable ingenuity in choice of subject. He is very fond of paradox. Take for example the way he expresses the pantheistic theme of the Unity of all existence-

The world is full of Thee and Thou art not in the world.

All are lost in Thee and Thou art not in the midst.

Thy silence is from Thy speech:

Thine hiding from Thine appearing

I see the way to Thee by means of the smallest atom;

Then I see the two worlds as the face of Allah.

For dualism there is no way into Thy presence.

Thou and Thy power are the whole universe.

A man of eloquent speech has well said in respect to the Essence

That Oneness is the dropping of all adjuncts.

There is no doubt as to the meaning of what I have said.

Thou art without eyes and there is no Universe ('Alam) or Knower ('Alim) but one."

In this last stanza it is possible to read either word given in brackets and the implication is that the Universe and the Knower (a name of God) are interchangeable terms.

The *Mantiq-ut-Tayr* is a sort of Pilgrim's Progress with birds for pilgrims. In it, in allegorical fashion, is depicted the ascending stages of the Mystic's progress to Unity with God. The birds gather together under the leadership of the Solomon of the Birds, the Hoopoe, to seek the Simurgh their mysterious King. The greater part of the book is taken up with his counsel to the assembled birds and anecdotes of pilgrims of the Sufi Path. Then the

birds set out and after traversing the seven valleys of Search.-Love, Mystic Apprehension, Detachment, Unity, Bewilderment and Annihilation-only thirty birds (si, thirty and murgh, bird) survived the privations and perils of the way and came to the threshold of the Simurgh's abode. Here there is a fanciful etymology for the name Simurgh, which lends itself to the denouement in the identification of the thirty birds with the Simurgh. In reality the name Simurgh is a compound of the Pahlawi seen, the name of a bird of prey, with murgh. The Simurgh is associated with early Persian mythology and stories of it are told in the ***Shahnama*** of Firdawsi.

The birds arrive at the threshold of the King's palace, and the chamberlain of Grace admits them into the Royal Presence where they are presented with the record of their deeds. Says 'Attar: "Seeing the record of their deeds those thirty birds were so ashamed that their very souls and bodies sunk into utter annihilation. But being thus purged and purified they emerged into new life by the Light of the Divine Presence. But now a new sort of amazement seized upon them. What they had done and left undone in the past was utterly obliterated from their breasts. It was as though they had changed identity. The Sun of the Near Presence shone from them, and that life by its rays illuminated them all. By their own reflection the thirty birds saw the face of the Simurgh. They were that and it was they. Lost in astonishment they could not tell whether they were this or that. Then they demanded of the Simurgh what this great mystery might mean tells them that his nature is like unto a mirror. Look-ing on then they perceive their true selves". Thus the birds became lost in the Simurgh and the shadows of phenomenal existence faded out in the light of the Sun of true existence¹¹.

Whatsoever, let's take a look about his main task by name The *Mantiq al-Tayr* (The Paliament of the Birds) is the most famous of all 'Attar's poems. It is a mystical allegory representing the slow and arduous journey of the Sufi mystic through all the trials and difficulties of the Path which leads him to God. It tells also of the final attainment, when he reaches his goal, and passes into the Presence of God, only to find that he is in reality one with God, and in that consciousness of union with the Divine, he attains to immortality. The poem contains a number of independent stories, each having a moral or mystical significance.

At the beginning the poem tells how all the birds, having gathered together, express their desire to have a king for themselves. The *Hooppoe* (hudhud), renowned above all the birds, because she was chosen by King Solomon to be his messenger to the Queen of Sheba, and who in token of her dignity wears the crest of spiritual knowledge on her breast, and a crown, the reward of piety, upon her head, tells them that they already have a sovereign, to whom they owe allegiance. His name is Simurgh (*Thirty Birds*), and he is the king of all the birds. He is near to them, but they are far from

him. He is such as to be beyond all description, and though it is hard to find the way to him, yet none of his subjects can rest without him. Those who go in search of him will meet with many difficulties on the way, and great courage and vigor and self-sacrifice will be needed to accomplish the journey, and yet to fail to find him is to spend one's life in vain. There are Seven Valleys to be crossed in order to reach the place of his abode, and the journey across these valleys means great risk and many adventures. The birds, on hearing all this, expressed their desire to undertake the quest and to travel to that mythical mountain Kaf, where dwelt their king, the All-Wise Simurgh, and do homage to him. Because of her wisdom and knowledge of Divine things, they choose the Hoopoe as their leader and guide. But when she proceeded to describe to them in detail the difficulties and dangers of the way, the enthusiasm of the birds began to wane and their courage failed them. One after another, they began to make their excuses. The Nightingale spoke of his love for the Rose, from whom he could not bear to be parted, but the Hoopoe bade him look upon the fadeless Beauty of that which is eternal, rather than that which is but transient and perishes anon. The Parrot declared that it was held captive in a cage, and was not free to go. The Peacock pleaded his unworthiness for so high a Quest, because he had had a share in driving out Adam from Paradise. The Duck claimed that it must have water if it was to be happy, and the Partridge that it needed its mountains. The Heron desired the lagoons where it was accustomed to wade in search of fish; the Owl wanted the ruins which it was wont to haunt. The Falcon did not wish to forego its privilege of resting on the King's wrist when he went forth to hunt, while the Wagtail held that it was a feeble creature, and had not the strength necessary for such a journey. All these excuses, which represent the weakness of human beings in the pursuit of spiritual things, were dealt with by the Hoopoe, who showed, by various illustrations and anecdotes that they were unworthy of being sustained. The birds, put to shame by her rebukes, asked her to explain what was their real relation to the Simurgh, and she told them how the *Simurgh* had once removed the veil from his face, and the rays of light which then issued from his countenance were changed into birds, so that in truth they were all one in essence with him. The Hoopoe then told them of the Seven Valleys which they must cross. The **first** of the Seven is the Valley of Search, in which the traveler meets with infinite difficulties and has to face all kinds of trials and calamities. At this stage, he must renounce all earthly things and detach himself from all that exists. When he has arrived at complete self-loss and is purified from all earthly ties, then the traveler will be illuminated by the Divine Light. He will see his quest to be not one but a thousand, but the Eternal Cup-Bearer will give him to drink of the wine of forgetfulness and he will go on his way, heedless of all the dangers that beset him. The **second** is the Valley of Love,

in which the soul of the traveler is consumed as with fire, in his desire to attain to his Beloved. That which may befall him matters naught; for him, evil and good have ceased to exist. He can no longer reason, for reason is to Love as the smoke to the fire, valueless and without reality. The traveler would fain be possessed of hundreds of thousands of lives that he might cast them all away for the sake of Love. The **third** valley is that of Knowledge, which has neither beginning nor end. Here the sun of Gnosis shines forth, and each traveler receives illumination according to his spiritual capacity for the reception of that light. Now are countless secrets revealed, and mysteries unveiled, but thousands are lost on the way for one who attains to complete apprehension. He who has apprehended no longer sees himself, but only his Beloved. Wherever he looks, he sees always the Face of God.

The **fourth** stage is the Valley of Detachment, where the traveler finds he himself free from all attachments, even from the desire to know the Divine secrets. There he realizes the Infinity of God, and the Divine Glory which envelops all things, and compared with which all else is as nothing. The **fifth** valley is that of Unification, where everything is unified, and the Unity is therefore complete. There is no longer any distinction of number or attribute, no place for death or life, time or eternity. Here Real Being will become manifest, and since God is One, comprehending all things, and without beginning or end, for He was from everlasting and will be to eternity, nothing exists save Him. "When everything is One, cease to speak of 'two.' Here there is no 'I' nor 'Thou.'" The **sixth** valley is the Valley of Bewilderment, for the traveler, having apprehended the Unity, loses himself completely, since he has ceased to be aware of himself. Whoever is conscious within his soul of the Unity, loses all things and himself. If he were asked, "Are you existent or not? Are you within or without? Manifest or hidden? Annihilated or subsistent?" he would say that he knows nothing and does not even know whether he knows. He knows that he loves, but knows not whom. Nor does he know whether he is Muslim or infidel. What is he then? He is hardly aware whether he loves or no, for his heart is full and empty of love, at one and the same time.

The **seventh** and last valley is the Valley of Annihilation, which passes all description. It means forgetfulness, dumbness, deafness, and stupefaction. He who loses himself there in the Ocean of Infinity is lost forever in self-annihilation and is at rest. There, in the waters of tranquility, he finds naught but oblivion. He who sinks into that Ocean will no longer manifest his own existence; he is, and he is not.

Of all the birds who set out on the Quest, to traverse the Seven Valleys, only thirty survived the privations and temptations of the way and succeeded in completing the journey to the abode of the Simurgh. These thirty birds,

purified by their trials, but weary, travel-stained, and heart-broken, presented themselves at the threshold of the King's Palace, only to find themselves bidden by the chamberlain to return whence they had come, because they were too insignificant and unworthy to enter into the Presence of the King. The birds, stricken to the heart by this rebuff, submitted that their love for the King was like that of the moth for the candle-flame, and sooner would they stay and be altogether consumed by their love than depart without attaining the object of their Quest. Then, at last, came the chamberlain of Grace, and by him they were admitted into the Royal Presence, and the Light of the Divine Glory was manifested to them, and they were allowed to approach the King. After this each one was given a record of his deeds, and on the perusal of this record they were so overcome by shame and remorse that they became completely annihilated and their bodies were reduced to dust¹².

Conclusion

After being gone through and deep study from the above study it has come into light that Attar has applied core principles of Sufi thought through which can be used as a tool of overcoming the ego. According to him as he believed that ego creates a barrier obscuring the divine light which Attar did not choose it and always stands against it that kept people separate from the almighty God. Throughout his prominent work he has tried to convey a message that where thirty birds or Se Murgh reach their destination only to discover that no one is there but they themselves are Simurgh, which has strongly highlight the Sufi conception that divine is not an external entity to be found anywhere but it has deep necessity of self realization and has given a space to realize through the destruction of the ego. When the ego has been dismantled common masses can become themselves true, shedding the veil and able to get true awareness. Whatsoever his magnum opus *Mantiq-ut-Tair* has stands a towering figure in the literature Persian and in the line Sufi Philosophy that has enriched Islamic mysticism highlighting the themes of annihilation of the self and overwhelming the power of almighty's' divine love.

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