

THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY AND THE  
LANGUAGE OF THE BIRDS

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## ABSTRACT

The famous mystic, poet and lover of God Fariduddin 'Attar wrote the beautiful *Mantiq-al-tayr* as an ode for the family of souls who yearn for returning to their original home and source i.e. the Presence of the Divine. *Mantiq-al-tayr* is an ode that uses symbolic language to guide spiritual seekers who are in search of God. The real aim and goal is knowledge of God which is the fruit tasted at the end of the spiritual journey. All those who have a faint memory of the origin, yearn for a return to that world which is the true source of all joy. This yearning is an indication that such souls belong to the family of birds. Their souls have wings which keep attempting to fly back to their original nest i.e. the space of Divine Presence. In order to undertake the spiritual journey human beings are taught to interiorize and "assume the character-traits of God." Only a person who has reached the station of union with God through inculcating His character-traits can be called one who has actualized his full and true potential. The *Mantiq al-tayr* of *Farid-al-Din 'Attar'* is a glorious, spiritually inspiring piece of Islamic literature which is an example of Islamic creativity at its highest level. The poem has an alchemical effect on the souls of its readers who cannot help but being affected by this journey of the birds to the top of the cosmic mountain *Qaf*. This poem also symbolizes how Islam views the whole spiritual journey from the dimension of the Divine Essence, the Creator to the dimension of the first of created beings i.e. the Logos or the First Intellect known in Sufi terminology as the Light of Muhammad and finally to the dimension of the human souls who strive to return to the light of the Divine Essence.

The famous mystic, poet and lover of God Fariduddin ‘Attar wrote the beautiful *Mantiq-al-tayr* as an ode for the family of souls who yearn for returning to their original home and source i.e. the Presence of the Divine. Fariduddin ‘Attar called this ode of 4458 verses by the names of *Zaban-i-murqhan*, which means literally, the *Language of the Birds* and *Maqamat-i-tuyur*, *The Station of the Birds*. According to the Quran, God taught this language of the birds (*Mantiq-al-tayr*) to Solomon and it is by this title that the peerless work of ‘Attar finally became known.<sup>1</sup>

Fariduddin ‘Attar was from Nishapur and most probably died of old age in 1220. ‘Attar is famous for his storytelling abilities which are greatly in evidence in his famous books, *Tadbkirat al-auliya*, “Stories of the Saints,” *Ilahiname*, “The Stories of the King and His Six Sons,” and the *Musibatname*, “The Book of Affliction.” He combines the attributes of a master storyteller and a poet in the ode *Mantiq-al-tayr*. This work became part of the classical works of Sufi literature which inspired generations of Sufis and poets who came after him.<sup>2</sup>

*Mantiq-al-tayr* is an ode that uses symbolic language to guide spiritual seekers who are in search of God. The real aim and goal is knowledge of God which is the fruit tasted at the end of the spiritual journey. All those who have a faint memory of the origin, yearn for a return to that world which is the true source of all joy. This yearning is an indication that such souls belong to the family of birds. Their souls have wings which keep attempting to fly back to their original nest i.e. the space of Divine Presence<sup>3</sup>.

And Soloman was David’s heir. And he said. ‘O mankin ! Lo ! we have been taught the language of the birds (*Mantiq al-tayr*) (xxvii:16)

‘Attar himself cites the reasons for writing this ode.

I have recited for you the language of the birds, one by one. Understand it then, O uninformed one! Among the lovers, those birds become free, who escape from the cage, before the moment of death. They all possess another account and description, for the birds possess another tongue. Before the *Simurgh* that person can make the elixir, who knows the language of the birds.<sup>4</sup>

‘Attar uses the most beautiful symbolic language to express the experience of mystic union with the Divine Beloved through this ode.

The theme of the soul's suffering due its separation from God is used as the motive force for starting the spiritual quest. 'Attar does not stop at this stage but goes beyond to reveal the mysteries of subsistence of the self (*baqa*) after it has already tasted annihilation (*fana*). At this stage the birds are able to recognize who they really are individually and finally to know themselves as they ought to be known in accordance to the saying, 'He who knows himself, knoweth the Lord'?<sup>5</sup>

O thou who through thy manifestation hath become invisible, the whole universe is Thee, but none hath beheld Thy face. The soul is hidden in the body and Thou in the soul, O thou hidden in the heart O Soul of soul !

Although Thou art hidden in the heart and the soul, Thou art manifest to both heart and the soul.

I see the whole Universe manifest by Thee, Yet I see no sign of Thee in the world.<sup>6</sup>

'Attar leads his readers by using the language of gnosis (*marifat*) fired by love of the Divine to the knowledge of the mystery of *Tawhid*. To reach this level of understanding, the reader is brought face to face with the concept of union with the Lord, not as intellectual concept but one which is grasped through the experience of actual spiritual tasting and initiation. The opening verses of the *Mantiq al-tayr* give the reader the confidence to trust the author as one which is a true guide. The author could not have revealed all that he did without having successfully undertaken the journey towards God himself. Only a master, intensely aware of the various stages of the journey and the various pitfalls that could distract the souls on the way, could have written such an account of the spiritual journey.

In order to undertake the spiritual journey human beings are taught to interiorize and "assume the character-traits of God."<sup>7</sup> Only a person who has reached the station of union with God through inculcating His character-traits can be called one who has actualized his full and true potential. "Assuming the character-traits of God" does not take place easily and usually requires the process of spiritual quest, initiation by a spiritual master, a spiritual journey under the guidance of the master, reaching and recognizing various spiritual stations and finally reaching the spiritual goal, namely the experience of union with the Divine Beloved. 'Attar's ode is considered as one of the most beautiful expositions of this journey. Couched in poetic language which makes use of universal archetypes the ode expresses the universal human longing to unite and subsist in the Divine. This spiritual journey is not just a quest for personal satisfaction. Instead, its aim is to fulfill the true purpose of human creation according to Islam, which is to worship God and to reach the highest human

potential of becoming the *Khalifatullah* or the “representative of God” on earth.

‘*Mantiq-al-tayr*’ is a master piece which gives its readers a good insight into how this journey is conducted and how the goal is reached by a variety of souls who have to overcome their own shortcomings and limitations.

‘Attar’s aim is to lead the reader through the beautiful and symbolic language of gnosis (*marifah*) to a clearer understanding of the process involved in transforming the soul so that it is purified and is able to reach its Divine home.

The following is a passage from Attar’s ode glorifying the Prophet who represented the first of God’s creation, the Logos, the Perfect Man (*Insan al-kamil*), the being who was the perfect reflection of God Himself. These passages from Attar’s poem are being presented for two reasons. One is to gain an insight into the flight of the birds or of souls towards God, how this journey takes place and what are its various way-stations. The second reason is to give an example of how creativity and art has been used to formulate some of the most beautiful verses in Islamic literature. The reader can perceive how creativity finds its highest and most beautiful expression in Islamic literature when it is under the sway of the highest Islamic goal i.e. union with the Divine Beloved. ‘Attar writes the following verses in praise of the Prophet whom he declares to be the Master.

The Master of the Nocturnal Ascent and foremost among creatures,  
The shadow of the Truth and the sun of the Divine Essence,  
The Master of the two worlds and the king of all,  
The sun of the soul and the faith of all beings,  
His light was the purpose of creatures; He was the principle of all  
existents and non-existents.  
When the Truth saw the absolute light present,  
It created a hundred oceans of light from his light.  
It created that pure gold for It self,  
Then created the creatures of the world for him.<sup>8</sup>

After the praise of the Prophet, the story of *Mantiq al-tayr* is presented which in itself is not a complicated one. The birds get together because they feel they need to have a king without whom they feel they cannot live in harmony and peace. The Hoopoe introduces himself to the assembly of birds as the ambassador sent by Solomon to the Queen of Sheba. He declares that the only bird worthy of being their king is the *Simurgh*.

All the birds realize that to reach the *Simurgh* is an arduous task so they make all sorts of excuses in order to avoid embarking on the journey. The Hoopoe is able to satisfy the questions and allay the fears and doubts of all the individual birds so that he rounds them up

for the journey. After having completed their preparations for the journey, they start the flight over the seven valleys of the spiritual mountain *Qaf*. Their aim is to reach the *Simurgh* or Celestial Monarch who resides on the top of this mountain.

The seven valleys which lead to the top of the mountain are the valleys of quest (*talab*), love (*ishq*), gnosis (*ma'rif*), contentment (*istighna*), unity (*twahid*), wonder (*hayrat*), poverty (*faqr*) and annihilation (*fana*). As is clear from the names of the valleys, they actually represent the various stages on the path which need to be actualized before the initiate can reach the top of the mountain and have a vision of the *Simurgh*.

The birds go through a transformation after they have achieved annihilation (*fana*) and it is only after this transformation that they can be in the Presence of the Divine. This is the part of the classical ode that highlights the intrinsic connection between the highest possible goal envisioned in Islam i.e. vision of God with the creative spiritual transformation that takes place within the being of the initiate who beholds God. 'Attar informs us that when the birds get transformed, each bird sees "it-self" because the thirty birds (*Simurgh*, in Persian ) see the *Simurgh* simultaneously as totally separate from themselves and also the same as themselves.

Each bird sees its higher self in the *Simurgh*. The amazing experience of these birds is that not only do they perceive the *Simurgh* in the eternal *Simurgh* outside themselves but also within themselves. In fact when they looked at both directions, i.e. within and without, the only thing they could perceive was the one and only *Simurgh*. Their amazement knows no bounds and they reach a state of meditation beyond meditation. While in this state of amazement they asked the *Simurgh* to unveil this great mystery. The asking of this question takes place without the use of language and the answer comes to them in the same mode for the questioners and questioned are participating in the phenomenon which can be called a sort of creative union where language has no place. Language is a means of communication between two separate beings. But the answer to the question is that the *Simurgh* or thirty birds saw themselves in the Divine Mirror which is God's Majesty Itself. Therefore all thirty birds saw themselves reflected in the Divine Mirror and at the same time they were aware of their own inner selves.

At this point another dimension is added to the spiritual journey i.e. the dimension of God's eternal transcendence which is beyond the experience of individual existence because the *Simurgh* in its essential and eternal level is higher than the experience of any individual creature.<sup>9</sup>

To be consumed by the light of the presence of the *Simurgh* is to realized that,

I know not whether I am Thee or Thou art I;  
I have disappeared in Thee and duality hath perished.<sup>10</sup>

Duality perishes only when the initiates experience annihilation of their individual selves through the actualization of their real Selves. They are able to experience their true reality which consists of pure spirit that was breathed into human beings at the outset of his/her creation. The real Self can only be experienced when all of the lower self has been annihilated and the soul unites with the One whose Breath constitutes its spirit.

The journey of the birds symbolizes the return journey to God which is in essence a creative, individual spiritual ascent just as the journey from God to material existence was a creative, individual, spiritual descent into formal matter. Creativity (*takebliq*) viewed from this perspective, was the means by which God manifested Himself through the mirror of the universe (*macrocosm*) and the mirror of the human being (*microcosm*).

Deeper contemplation of this phenomenon reveals that in His attribute of being the Creator (*Khaliq*) God never stops being the Creator of everything starting from the creation of the First Intellect, the Logos or the Light of Muhammad, to the generation of the whole of cosmos that stands bellow this first creation. He made the human being special for He formed a creature which contained the potential of actualizing all the attributes and names of God within itself. Seyyed Hossain Nasr explains this creative relationship from the perspective of *Fariduddin Attar's Simurgh*:

The *Simurgh* in reality symbolizes both the Divine Essence which stands above the created order and the Divinity as Creator and principle manifestation. The point on top of Mount *Qaf* is at once in the infinite expanse of the sky and the principle generation of the whole cosmic mountain below it. Moreover it is the point where the two orders, namely, the created and the uncreated, meet under this aspect, the abode of the *Simurgh* corresponds to the Logos or Intellect which is both created and uncreated depending upon how it is envisaged.<sup>11</sup>

Here we observe that the “point on top of *Mount Qaf*” is the creative juncture between the world of spirit and the world of matter. It can be looked at as symbolizing the Creative principle which becomes the means and isthmus, (*barzakb*) of creation of the whole cosmos as well as the means of creation reaching back to its Origin. ‘Attar’s *Mantiq-al-tayr* is a piece of Sufi literature which has been successful in expressing difficult esoteric concepts in beautiful and comprehensible symbolic language and this great Sufi mystic’s

influence on many generations of Sufis that came after him cannot be doubted.<sup>12</sup>

The *Mantiq al-tayr* of *Farid-al-Din 'Attar'* is a glorious, spiritually inspiring piece of Islamic literature which is an example of Islamic creativity at its highest level. The poem has an alchemical effect on the souls of its readers who cannot help but being affected by this journey of the birds to the top of the cosmic mountain *Qaf*. This poem also symbolizes how Islam views the whole spiritual journey from the dimension of the Divine Essence, the Creator to the dimension of the first of created beings i.e. the Logos or the First Intellect known in Sufi terminology as the Light of Muhammad and finally to the dimension of the human souls who strive to return to the light of the Divine Essence.

## NOTES AND REFERENCE

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- <sup>1</sup> Seyyed H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1987. p. 99.
  - <sup>2</sup> Annemarie Schemmel, Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2003, Lahore, p. 305.
  - <sup>3</sup> Seyyed H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. p.98.
  - <sup>4</sup> Fariduddin 'Attar, *'Mantiq-al-tayr*, edited by M. J. Mashkur, Tehran, 1337 (A.H Solar), p. 316 trans. Seyyed H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 1987, Suhail Academy, Lahore, p.99.
  - <sup>5</sup> This famous saying usually cited in Sufi texts as a hadith is not acknowledged by the specialists.
  - <sup>6</sup> Fariduddin 'Attar, *'Mantiq-al-tayr*, edited by M. J. Mashkur, p. 6 trans. Seyyed H. Nasr, 1987, p. 100.
  - <sup>7</sup> William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*. Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000. p. 283
  - <sup>8</sup> Seyyed H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*. p. 101.
  - <sup>9</sup> It is worth mentioning here that another great Muslim thinker Avicenna was able to tackle this theme of the esoteric spiritual journey in a beautiful manner. Refer to Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. W.R. Trask, New York, 1960: Corbin, En. Islam Iranian, vol. II.
  - <sup>10</sup> 'Arrar, *Mantiq al-tayr*, trans. p. 267, Nasr, 101.
  - <sup>11</sup> Seyyed H. Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, p.112.
  - <sup>12</sup> Schimmel, p. 305.