

Sufism in Attar's "*The Conference of the Birds*" Selected Translation by Peter Avery: Representations of Mystical Experience in Islamic Literature

Dr. Sobia Tahir

*Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy and Liberal Arts,
Government College University (GCU), Lahore*

Mehak Maqbool

*Visiting Faculty, Department of Philosophy and Liberal Arts,
Government College University (GCU), Lahore*

Aneel Waqas Khan

*Visiting Faculty, Department of Philosophy and Liberal Arts,
Government College University (GCU), Lahore*

Abstract

In this paper, we seek to evaluate the presentation of Sufism in Attar's "*The Conference of the Birds*", a Poem translated into the English by Peter Avery, in the Islamic literature. The investigation in its turn is directed on the modern writings to expose how the authors derive from the Sufi traditions the themes, the symbols, and acts to allegorize the many mystical experiences and spiritual search. The combination of literature, cultural, and also religious studies will bring in new perspectives to the study of Sufism and fiction to also enhance our understanding of the connection between Sufism and the fiction, and its importance concerning the modern Muslim identity and the spirituality.

Keywords: Sufism, Islam, Mystical Experience, Farid ud-Din Attar, Peter Avery

Introduction

Sufism (Islamic mysticism) is among the biggest philosophical and spiritual influences in Islam. Sufism is derived from the Quran and the teachings of



Prophet Muhammad and it emphasizes on the inner way to the God through meditation, Dhikr (remembrance of God) and discipline. The aim of the sufis was to reach an inner purity and nearness to God called fana (loss of self) and baqa (existence of God). Sufism is used in Islam as a means of strengthening the faith and of understanding the divine mysteries that surpass the literal comprehension of the divine texts. It emphasizes love, compassion and humility as the ways to spiritual enlightenment. The orders (tariqas) of Sufism have been powerful agents of Islam's spread, sometimes due to missionary activities, schools and welfare centers. Sufism literature in the Islam has created many poems, prose and allegorical stories that discuss about love, devotion and spiritual transformation. Literature has been profoundly shaped by Sufi poets such as Rumi, Hafiz, and Attar who used mystical symbols and pictures to describe the indescribable moments of union with God. Sufi literature is also a tool for mediation and inspiration it digs deep in the human soul and the transcendental worlds of spiritual reality. In general, the place that Sufism occupies in Islam and Islamic literature is determined by its interest in internal cleansing, spiritual progress, and pursuit of divine union. It offers the way of love, knowledge, and enlightenment thus, imprinting on the spiritual skyline of the Muslim communities and later the lair of generations of poets, scholars, and seekers to God.

Farid ud-Din Attar was a 12th Century Iranian poet, a thinker and a Sufi who came from Nishapur, Iran. The "*Conference of The Birds*" by him which is one of the most outstanding work of the Sufism is the most known symbol of the Sufi thought all over the world. Attar's poems present us a philosophy of love and soul that can be stated as spiritual conquest of the soul toward God. The research shown on his work points out the character of the influence of Sufism on his concepts, the aspects of self-denial, devotion, and inner change being his main focus. Accordingly, the poetry of Attar may be abundant with allegories and symbols, which were sometimes used in order to understand religious meanings and knowledge. A perfect work of art on this subject is *The Conference of the Birds* which shows a group of birds, who seek for the king that typifies the same way how the soul leads to the enlightenment and the meeting with the God. Other literary masterpieces express being legends that are full of the deep poetry where readers are invited

to consider the enigmatic and mysterious side of the existence and the last truth of the Divine love through poetry. Attar is no different.

The *Greed of the birds* (Mantiq ul-Tair) is the extremely popular Persian literary masterpiece written by the Farid ud-Din Attar in the 12th century. This poetry describes the events which occurred while a group of birds went on an expedition to find their king, which symbolized the soul's quest for union with its own innate self. Every bird is actually referring to different moral state or also spiritual condition. These are connected with the problems and challenges that normal people are facing on the way of getting self-knowledge. Through the symbolic abstraction and musical rhythm, which the lay composition of Attar is concerned with, the issues of love, worship and spiritual transformation are discussed and the author applies the Sufism tradition of mysticism. On their long way from being the young songs to totally maturing birds, the birds make trials and tribulations that leads them to the idea that Simurgh is present within them and that means the essential meaning of divinity in a human being is shown. This translation of the "*The Conference of the Birds*" by Peter Avery from Persian to English is a masterpiece, one of the most popular English versions of this Persian classic literary work. Included in The Penguin Classics series, the translation exposes the poetic beauty and religious depth of the original work, therefore making it more available for a wider audience. The character of Avery is the embodiment of the literal meaning of the parable of Attar that is the story of a flock of birds on their symbolic quest to the self-discovery and cosmic consciousness. Avery's prose is very captivating and his images very descriptive which render Attar's poetic world of love, devotion and divine truth. The English translation of *The Conference of the Birds* by Avery has been commended for its accuracy and the way it portrays the mystical teachings of Sufism to an English-speaking audience. The book is honored even today as an important translation, adding to the face of the literature with its eternal truths and topics of religion that continue to regulate man's life.

Significance of Research

This work is pertinent to the fields of literary studies, religious studies and cultural studies as it unveils how Sufism is portrayed in the contemporary

Islamic fiction through the English translation of Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* by Peter Avery. This paper analyses the way in which the author displays his many maneuvering skills on the different complexities of mysticism and also spirituality in. This will hopefully give us a much better understanding of the Sufi thought and its many significances in the Muslim literature and identity. The outcomes of this research also add to the discussions of how literature impacts on the theological and also cultural discourse in the Muslim community.

Research Questions

1. What kind of Sufi concepts of love, unity, and spiritual awakening does the Attar's "*The Conference of the Birds*"?
2. How do the cultural, historical, and religious contexts shape Attar's "*The Conference of the Birds*" within the Islamic literature?
3. Which current fictional narratives emphasize Sufi characteristics, symbols, or practices in "*The Conference of the Birds*" by Attar?

Objectives of Research

- To grasp the beliefs of love, unity, and spiritual promotion in Attar's "*The Conference of the Birds*".
- To investigate the impacts of the cultural, historical, and religious contexts on the portrayal of Sufism in Attar's "*Conference of the Birds*" within the Islamic literature.
- To illustrate the instances of recent fictional tales in Attar's "*The Conference of the Birds*" that prominently portray the Sufi themes, symbols or practices.

Literature Review

As postulated by Ernst, Sufism came out as a reflection to the institutionalization of Islam, with a strong desire to have a more experiential and intimate relationship with the Divine. Sufi teachings include the practice of meditation, chanting and dhikr (remembering God) and are the means through which the aspirants reach spiritual wisdom and divine union.¹ Additionally, as a result of the fact that Sufism is characterized by love, compassion, and inner purification, the followers of this philosophical trend

have been coming from different cultures and geographical locations.² Poetry, music, and dance are among the many forms of expression in which Sufi masters portray the divine secrets and the transcendence of language and culture barriers.³ Sufism, nevertheless, has raised some issues among Muslim scholars regarding its role in the religion. It has been claimed by some Muslims that Sufism is a part of spiritual Islamic teachings while others go on to say that it is a deviation from well-established orthodox Sufism teachings.⁴ Notwithstanding, the majority of Muslims, deem Sufism as a substantial aspect of their spiritual tradition, providing them with directions for their spiritual journeys and peace in a fast secularizing world.⁵ Way more, sufi literature use figurative language and symbolism to symbolize esoteric truths and mystical insight. Books like *"Fusus al-Hikam"* (written by Ibn Arabi) and *"Alchemy of Happiness"* (written by Al-Ghazali) are among the mystical Sufi philosophy sources, which explain concepts such as divine unity (tawhid) and the stages of spiritual ascent (maqamat).⁶ Along with the poems and philosophical treatises the Sufi tales and hagiographies, the latter being of greatest importance, are used to show Sufism in the Islamic literature. Closely connected to this tradition are poetry collections such as *"Conference of the Birds"* and *"The Maqamat of Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadani"* that relate morally loaded narratives dealing with the spiritual journey, difficult theological questions and the answers provided by Sufi masters.⁷ Moreover, modern writers can be observed who examine Sufi plots in their literature and interweave mystical and spiritual aspects with modern stories. Writers in the mold of Elif Shafak, who wrote novels like *"Forty Rules of Love,"* offer a unique combination of historical fiction and Sufism message, being loved by readers of diverse backgrounds.⁸

The poetry of Farid ud-Din Attar is characterized by strong spiritual depth and allegorical complication. *Mantiq al-Tayr*, which is his magnum opus, represents one of the greatest masterpieces of Persian Sufi literature that unites such themes as spiritual quest, self-discovery, and divine love. Additionally, Attar's writings represent a profound involvement with Sufi doctrine and mysticism, referring to the teachings of such figures as Ibn Arabi and Rumi. In an elegant way of symbolism and metaphoric images, Attar delivers deep spiritual truths and the understanding of the existence of

the human soul. In addition, Attar's influence does not merely exist in the domain of Persian literature; on the contrary, it is also extended to the generations of poets and mystics throughout the Islamic world. His poetry will continue to inspire those who seek the truth and also love the beauty, regardless of the language or culture.⁹ Apart from "*The Conference of the Birds*," Attar composed "*The Book of Affliction*" (Asrarnamēh) and "*The Book of Suffering*" (Mokhtarnamēh) to prove his poetic talent and also probing mind even further.¹⁰ Attar's spiritual depth and wisdom come very much alive with Peter Avery's translation of "*The Conference of the Birds*". Likewise, in his attention to the details and poetic feeling, Avery successfully captures the spirit of Attar's allegorical tale, without losing the richness and also complexity of the original story. Moreover, Avery's translation is provided with an informative preface that incorporates the readers into the allegorical themes and symbolism in the "*The conference of the Birds*." His annotations reveal Sufi mysticism and Persian literary tradition, thus, enhancing the readers' experience. In the translation of "*The Conference of the Birds*" by Peter Avery, there are a literary value and a remarkable tool for the promotion of Attar's work among the wider public and for the breakthrough of the cultural dialogue and mutual understanding. Avery's poetic interpretation welcomes us to the mystical realm of Sufi spirituality, without supplying the right answers related to the meaning of life and human soul.¹¹

Research Methodology

This research paper aims to explore Sufism's representations in the translation by Peter Avery of Attar's "*The Conference of the Birds*" within Islamic literature. The study will take a contemporary approach and examine how authors infuse Sufi ideas, symbols, and practices into their works to represent mystical experiences and spiritual journeys. Through the process of literary analysis, cultural studies and religious studies, the research seeks to explore the crossroads between Sufism and fiction, and its impact on the Muslim identity and spirituality of the modern times.

Discussion and Analysis

"*The Conference of the Birds*" by Attar is a timeless work of art that meticulously combines Sufi concepts of love, unity, and spiritual

enlightenment through allegorical narratives and deep poetic words. In his translation done by Peter Avery, the poem tells the story of a flock of birds setting out to find their spiritual leader who is the Simurgh and this mirrors the Sufi search for the divine truth and realization.

Depiction of Sufi Concepts such as love, unity, and spiritual enlightenment

Love is a foundational stone of Sufi doctrine, as it is the source of the change that empowers the seeker to begin the spiritual way. In Attar's poem, the birds' need for union with the Simurgh implies the soul's desire for reunification with the God. Every bird in presenting itself on the road, "*young bound by the limits of desires and worldly attachments,*" takes a step on the path of life with all its restrictions and limitedness. This entrapment passes for the human condition, with the soul being bound by the ephemeral pleasures and attractions of the material world. Still, deep inside, there is a strong desire for something more – a search for that special union with the Beloved, which cannot be contained by the limitations of time and space. Unity is the other profound theme of "*The Conference of the Birds*" that emphasizes the fact that everything is interdependent and, fundamentally, is one with the Divine. As the birds fly off to their collective quest, they lose themselves in their separate identities to become one in their search for spiritual salvation. The trip symbolizes a universal quest for truth, in which people of all kinds come along on this journey. The path they choose is set forth as the only path to complete happiness, with no way out from the body and soul other than the journey of reaching the divine. This idea is aimed at implying the interconnectedness of everything in existence and common fate of every soul that is on the spiritual path. The spiritual enlightenment, or gnosis (ma'rifah) which is the ultimate goal of the spiritual journey described in the poem is portrayed by Attar. The inner opening of a person to divine truth is presented as the peak of human experience, rising above the physicality of the terrestrial existence and carrying the soul into the world of spiritual consciousness. Attar's likeness of the heart "*soaring*" and "*filling the sphere*" implicates the sense of expanse and transcendence implying that the soul travels in the direction of divine unity and attaining of spiritual perfection. This theme of enlightenment reinforces the transformative power of inner awakening and the internal revolution of consciousness which usually

follows the realization of divine truth. Allegory is one of the most important literary techniques that Attar employs in the Conference of the Birds for the purpose of conveying deeper spiritual meanings. So, the readers are invited to look into the intricacies of life and the nature of the soul. The pains and difficulties of the birds of the air are symbols of the challenges on the way of a spiritual seeker, actually trials of their faith, resolution, will and strength. But also deliverance is there, because birds feel comfortable, as they approach their abode and, probably, the real selves.

Cultural, Historical, and Religious Contexts

Attar's Book of the Birds is unquestionable an expression of Sufism in Islamic literature. Attar's works are the symbol of the mystic character of Sufism, which is based on the internal spiritual path to the true religious knowledge and divine union. Attar emphasized on the self, love and the truth as the basic values of the Islamic culture, history and religious teachings by the use of allegory and poetic image. The central aspects of symbolism and allegory are the major ways through which Sufism expression and representation in Attar's works are affected by the cultural context. The Sufi literature is wonderfully rich in the usage of allegorical storytelling as the medium to convey the spiritual truths and teachings in a highly figurative way, which truly suits the cultural and religious background of the audience. "The Conference of the Birds" by Attar is a journey shared by a group of birds that represent the soul's adventure to God. Each bird symbolizes a unique quality of the journey, and their common duty reveals the struggles and obstacles any devotee must cross to get the Divine wisdom.

For example,

*"Each one of us, according to the truth,
Is passing on the road, confined in youth;"*

The road represents the journey of human life; the youth symbolizes the first stages of spiritual development. This echoes with the cultural notion of life as an ongoing trip to spiritual maturity and enlightenment which is well rooted in the Islamic teachings. Besides, the historical background has a great impact on the representation of Sufism in Attar's text. Attar lived in the time of Islamic Golden Age, a period of prosperity of the Muslim world in intellectual and cultural aspects. This was time when Sufi mysticism became a

prominent spiritual movement, involving Sufi scholars and poets like Attar. "The Conference of the Birds" embodies the intellectual and spiritual atmosphere of this period; it alludes to the teachings of earlier Sufi masters which it intertwines into the narrative plot.

For example,

*"But if the heart should wise, and knowledge win,
Its dust will fill the sphere, and soar therein."*

In his poem, Attar refers to wisdom and knowledge as vital for the spiritual journey and these coincide with what Sufi philosophers and mystics recommendation of the cultivation of inner wisdom as the means of attaining spiritual enlightenment. This is indicative of the historical context within which Attar lived, where Sufi scholars had a major role in the preservation and transmission of knowledge throughout Islam. Religion, too, is a determining factor in the way Sufism is represented in Attar's poem because Sufism arose within the bigger framework of Islamic esotericism. While Sufism is a unique and mystical branch of Islam, it has deep links to the Quran and Hadith, as well as the model of Prophet Muhammad. Attar uses these religious bases to tackle the divine love, submission, and the journey to unite with God in "*The Conference of the Birds*".

For example,

*"And from this way, which leads us to our goal,
There is no exit – for the body, soul."*

In this stage, Attar was giving expression to the fact that, according to Islamic philosophy, the soul's path to the higher power has already been designed. Actually, the mystical fatalism is in the core of Sufi teaching. The person is to submit to God's fate and to the road (way) to salvation under a specific direction.

Contemporary Fictional Narratives

The Conference of the Birds" by Attar can be classified as one of the many modern fictional narratives where the Sufi elements like themes, symbols or practices are somehow depicted. These stories become allegories that carry many messages of depth and also wisdom. I. *Journey as a Symbol of Spiritual Quest*: I am going to the park. The whole story of "*The Conference of the Birds*" is about a bird's journey

to the Simurgh, a mythic bird that represents the Divine. The voyage is the trip of the soul that is traveling to have a unity with the God. Each one of us who comes to know the truth, is passing on the road.

2. *Youth as Symbol of Spiritual Immaturity*: The dog is very smart. The phrase "youth bound" implies the limitation and immaturity. In Sufi symbolism, youth is the stage of the spiritual young ignorance, being tied to the material world and desires. The birds' journey may serve as a symbol of leaving the barriers behind and becoming mature and enlightened beyond the spiritual youth state.

3. *The Unending Path of Spiritual Evolution*: Stealth Injector, the given sentence. Though by this road we walk and get to our aim, there is no exeunt. The quest of Sufism is to know the Divine across a lifetime of self-realization and also spiritual development. The end of this journey is not determined since the soul seeks to reach a deeper level of its relationship with the Divine.

4. *The Role of Heart and Knowledge in Spiritual Awakening*: Be prepared to handle the sudden and unexpected incidents very efficiently and also competently without compromising the patient safety. We can find out from the excerpt that what can cause us to surpass the obstacles of the material world is the awakening of the heart and the accumulation of the knowledge. Only when the heart gains the wisdom and come to know, overcome the limitations of the material world and get the freedom of the expansion. This verse with the line " But the dust grows wiser, and wisdom wins; and so, it fills the sphere, and flies above" highlights the liberating force of knowledge and learning in the elevating the soul in a spiritual ascension.

5. *Unity and Oneness of Existence*: The Clock is ticking and the door is still open. Sufi philosophy has a focus on the unity and oneness. " *The Conference of the Birds*" is about the collective search or journey on the part of the birds to Simurgh which is the symbol for the path of the soul to union with the Divine. Every bird represents us some element of the human soul or some spiritual state, but they eventually get into the same direction. This diversity in the unity expresses the interdependency of all the phenomenal world and the single being of the Divine. Via these narratives, Attar summarizes the sincere Sufi teachings in the specifics of the existence, the

advent of the soul and the way to the spiritual development. In the diversity of the love's many forms the text offers us an opportunity of delving deep into its own sense and also imagery and of contemplating the eternal wisdom it embodies. In the series of their mysterious adventures the birds initiate the readers in their own inner expedition in the acquisition of the truth, wisdom, and the final reunion with the Divinity.

Conclusion

Attar's "*The Conference of the Birds*" portrays very important Sufi concepts such as love, unity, and spiritual realization in a very deep manner. In a way allegorical the birds directed towards the Simurgh presents Attar the Sufism way to self-awareness and an infinite with the Divine. The poem by Peter Avery which is translator's adaptation greatly reflects the significance of wisdom and knowledge in the spiritual journey. Sufism as presented by Attar in the "*The Conference of the Birds*" is greatly shaped by the cultural, historical, and religious context of Islamic literature. The poem brings to light the central place of Islamic mysticism in its framework, relying on themes and symbols that have deep meaning in the Sufi culture. The metaphor of the birds undertaking a dangerous journey is a pointer to the ordeals Sufis go through in their pilgrimage for spiritual revelation.

Attar's work also offers the readers modern fictionalized stories which carry Sufi topics, images, and ideas. Allegorical tale in Attar reveals classic topics of spiritual rebirth, and search for ultimate truth. The text encourages the readers to meditate on their personal spiritual journey with all its hindrances that one must overcome as a means of enrichment, success and happiness. Nevertheless, Peter Avery's translation of "*The Conference of the Birds*" stands out as the most prominent one among other translations in the sense that it is the one through which you can get a deeper understanding and appreciation of Attar's work. Taking care of the details, Avery's renderings thus make people in English used to the poetic aesthetics and philosophical depth of the original Persian text of Attar, therefore they are able to access to the profound wisdom contained within it. Camus's outstanding translation nurtured the poetic level of the poem without worsening its spirit. That said, "*The Conference of the Birds*" is the product of a combination of Attar's

spiritual enlightenment and his keen understanding of Sufism. As embarking on the way to self-transformation and spiritual understanding, the poet uses allegories and colorful images. Peter Avery's translation deals with the intersection of cultures, helping the readers to get acquainted with the Iranian Muslim tradition, and drawing from the universal truths hidden in Attar's ageless treatise.

References

- ¹ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Shambhala Publications 2011).
- ² Syed Hossein Nasr. *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (World Wisdom, 2010).
- ³ Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (Harper One, 2006).
- ⁴ J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1988).
- ⁵ William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction* (One World Publications, 2008).
- ⁶ Muhyū al-dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *Fusus al-Hikam* (Islamic Texts Society, 1980).
Abū Hāmid, *The Alchemy of Happiness* (Islamic Book Trust, 2001), Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadhānī, *The Maqamat of Badi'a-Zaman al-Hamadhani* (Library of Arabic Literature, 2016).
- ⁸ Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi* (Penguin Books, 2010).
- Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār, *The Conference of the Birds* (Penguin Classics, 2017).
- ¹⁰ Attar, *The Book of Affliction* (Alma Classics, 2019).
- ¹¹ Attār, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Peter Avery (Penguin Classics, 1984).