

## LITERARY TRADITIONS IN COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: ATTAR'S 'THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS' AND DANTE'S 'THE DIVINE COMEDY'

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### Abstract

Present literature comparative study addresses the connections of literature with history, philosophy, religion and literary theory via exploring existing similarities and differences in 'The Conference of the Birds' and 'The Divine Comedy'. This paper also extends a sophisticated understanding of cultural difference and diversity in literary works. This comparative study discusses theme, structure and narration of 'The Conference of the Birds' and 'The Divine Comedy' in the imaginative version of medieval view. The results show Attar of Nishapur and Dante Alighieri captivate their own poetic style through symbolic use, allegorical presentation, mystic experience, and mythical components in spite of all differences and similarities of context and form.

**Keywords:** The Conference of the birds, The Divine Comedy, Journey, Mysticism, Narrative Style, Form, Dramatic version.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant subsets of "Quest" is journey. Journey emerges in various methods in literature. It can be the main path of story and had outer aspect as well as internal aspect including psychological journey into psyche. Two samples of world literary works which are considered as masterpieces of metaphysical journeys are "The Conference of the Birds" (Mantiq-ut-Tayr) by Attar and "The Divine Comedy" by Dante.

The mystery of journey is a discovery sense of human to discover uncertainties and reaching destination that defined as Simorgh (a mythical Persian bird roughly equivalent to the western phoenix) in "Conference of Birds" and Trinity in "Divine Comedy". Travellers of these two journeys -that considered as a metaphysical journey and oriental people called it: 'Soluk' (Journey of truth) - are not after finding physical paradise but attempt to move beyond the promised paradise and unify with the creator of paradise, and in a nutshell try to rejoin God. In this way it can be considered that these two journeys are spiritual journeys and pose common axes; the following points can be noted :1- trying to reach unity (briefly discussed above), 2- difficulties of this journey, 3- having a master or Murshid who can guide them in this journey.

Most part of difficulties of this journey in the Divine Comedy have a geographical aspect, and through

passing nine levels of inferno, reaching purgatory, passing through it and finally reaching paradise in the pick of purgatory mountain. In “Conference of Birds”, passions emerged in other forms for birds. They drowned in the sea, they died of drought and thirst, victimized by fire and haunted by wild animals. In short, the travelers pass through various valleys and climb from a level to the next without any stop; during these surfs, conflicts and struggles are shown among these disciples.

What is presented align with following-important themes of these two works in this paper, is to reinvestigate not only in the terms of similarities but also around some present general dissimilarities in present authors’ mindset, narrative style, and pen of these two poets. Objective of present study is to compare “Divine Comedy” and “Conference of Birds” in three following major sections:

1. To examine narrative style and writing style of these two works
2. To investigate present composition and overall path of story in “Divine Comedy” and “Conference of Birds”
3. To introduce and study these two mentioned works as dramatic verse

For better understanding, the researchers give a brief introduction to Dante and Attar along with their biography and other works.

Farid al-Din Aṭṭar also called Farid al-Din Abu Ḥamid Muḥammad (born 1142?, Nishapur, Iran-died c. 1220, Mecca, Saudi Arabia) Persian Muslim poet who was one of the greatest Sufi (mystical) writers and thinkers, composing at least 45,000 distichs (couplets) and many brilliant prose works. As a young man Farid al-Din travelled widely, visiting Egypt, Syria, Arabia, India, and Central Asia. He finally settled in his native town, Nishapur, in north-eastern Iran, where he spent many years collecting the verses and sayings of famous Sufis. His name, Attar, which literally means a perfumer or apothecary, may indicate that he, his father, or his grandfather practiced that trade. There is much controversy among scholars concerning the exact details of his life and death as well as the authenticity of many of the literary works attributed to him.

The greatest of his works is the well-known *Maṭṭeq al-ṭayr* (The Conference 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 approach the throne contemplating their reflections in the mirror like countenance of the Simorgh, only to realize that they and the Simorgh are one. Other important works of this prolific poet include the *Elāhī-nāma* (The *Ilahī-nāma* or Book of God) and the *Moṣībat-nāma* (“Book of Affliction”), both of which are mystical allegories similar in structure and form to *Maṭṭeq al-ṭayr*; the *Dīvān* (“Collected Poems”); and the famous prose work *Tadhkerat al-Awlīyā*, an invaluable source of information on the early Sufis (abridged Eng. trans., Muslim Saints and Mystics). From the point of view of ideas, literary themes, and style, Attar’s influence was strongly felt not only in Persian literature but also in other Islamic literatures. (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2015)

Dante, in full Dante Alighieri (born c. May 21–June 20, 1265, Florence —died Sept. 13/14, 1321, Ravenna), poet, prose writer, literary theorist, moral philosopher, and political thinker. Dante is best known for the monumental epic poem *La commedia*, later named *La divina commedia* (The Divine Comedy). Dante was born around 1265 (Late middle ages and before Renaissance). This period was simultaneous with the Mongol invasion to Asia; around twenty years before the birth of Dante, Attar was killed in invasion of this tribe. Cultural condition of Florence in time of Dante was much similar to cultural condition of Nishapur in time of Attar, and this European city was dynamic and fruitful in term of science just like Nishapur.

## 2. COMPOSITION AND PATH OF STORY IN “CONFERENCE OF BIRDS” AND “DIVINE COMEDY”

2.1. *Divine Comedy* includes 100 cantos which is divided into three sections: inferno, purgatory, and paradise. Each section divided into thirty three cantos; in addition, there is an introductory cantos in Inferno book before first cantos of Inferno which is considered as an introduction to the whole Divine Comedy. In fact, this book includes various stages of evolution of human spirit. Inferno is situated inside earth and divided into nine circles. The very first five circles called Hell, Upper Hell, and the last four circle called Lower Hell that imagined like a city (Dis) which surrounded with iron walls and red clothing. Lucifer placed at the pick of cone where is located in centre of earth. From the pick of this cone, there is a tight and narrow path to the other surface of earth ends to Purgatory Island in the southern hemisphere. Hell and its porches are shown like a mountain that on its peak Garden of Eden placed and is considered as the only gate to the sky. Dante in this stage ends his terrestrial journey with Virgil and rise into the sky with Beatrice. Palasios (1968) asserted in Dante’s time Europe there were a translation of “Levitation of prophet Mohammad” in Latin language that might be inspiration source of Dante in his heavenly journey to paradise; Dante in architecture

of heavens and heavenly stages, worked very similar to stages that prophet of Islam passed through them in his ascension to the sky; and even named some of the heavens which Prophet Mohammad named while passing through seven skies. In Divine Comedy, earth design is Ptolemaic cosmology which in that model earth is a center of gravity and nine concentric spheres circled it; first seven spheres are planetary skies including Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn that join Fixed stars, and the outermost which is Primum Mobile. Primum Mobile also ends to the divine throne that does not fit within the confines of time and space. Dante after reaching this place achieved a stage that Sufis and mystics called it "Fanna-fi-Allah". All of these stages and heavens just like seven valleys of Attar along with number seven are symbolic and iconic that will be discussed in details.

2.2. Attar divided *The Conference of Birds* verse into forty-five articles which poses a framework of a drama that even can be altered into a scenario with a little summarization and change<sup>1</sup>. Forty-five articles of *The Conference of Birds* can be divided into several sections as follows: First, introducing eleven birds among thirty birds who are the most important personalities of story; second, gathering of birds and acknowledging that they need a master ruler; thirdly, the speech of Hoopoe about Simorgh and need for joining him; fourthly, obstructing birds and refusal of journey and answer of Hoopoe to each of them; next, beginning journey and seven described valleys along with their passions; finally, birds reaching Mountain Qaf and discovery of Simorgh.

### 3. NARRATIVE STYLES AND WRITING STYLE

#### 3.1. Narrative Styles

The first point which is notable in the comparison of narrative styles of "Divine Comedy" and "The conference of Birds" is the presence of a main story and several subsidiary stories to complete them. In both of "The Conference of Birds" and "Divine Comedy", the main story is considered as extract, fundamental axis and general system of story that several other stories were narrated based on it. In both of the works, subsidiary stories are included to explain and emphasize on contents of the main flow of story according to topics. Mazaheri (2007) suggested Attar had a connection with people on all social classes because he was a perfumer and it could be the best reason that his daily engagement with ordinary people, placed him in the center of populace and familiarized him with their culture and folk literature. Attar could simplify theosophical concepts for ordinary people through entering folkloric allegories and tales into the context of theosophical narrations in verse because of his depth knowledge of folklore. Poornamdarian (1994) that Attar entered daily life of people into theosophical literature through entering folk literature into theosophical context of "The Conference of Birds" in a simple word and without any ornamentation. The same way was found out in Dante. Dante in Divine Comedy attempted to employ true characters to make his story more realistic and understandable through referring Italian (more precisely Florentines) history. However, Dante personalized history of Florence according to his taste to reach his political goals. Although, Dante narrated his story through utilizing Italian history that had a close connection with people's life and was words of month, but this way did not confine to describe these events as a report and utilized a figurative language. One of these figures of speech which has been used widely in both Dante and Attar literature is allegory. For example, seven valleys of Attar, Mountain Qaf, Simorgh, and each one of the birds that represent a class of Attar's society, all are evidences of presenting allegory in his literature. Borges (1998) confirmed a strong presence of allegory in Divine Comedy. Borges added that Dante did not just describe the events, he used metaphor to compose a poetical work... it is insufficient to him to express that infernal people closed their seventh circle of their eyes to see him but used metaphor to people that watches each other in a dimmed moonlight and with an old tailor who tries to thread a needle. As observed, some differences can also be noted in the works of these two poets. Although, among all tales, some historical tales is also can be observed in subsidiary stories of Attar, since these tales are mixed with fiction and used as a complementary for other mythical stories of "The Conference of Birds"; maybe it can be concluded that Divine Comedy due to utilizing real events is more realistic and believable than The Conference of Birds.

#### 3.2. Writing Style

Ashrafzadeh (1992) suggested Attar unlike Nezami and Saeb who followed the authenticity of art and rationalism. Ashrafzadeh also stated Attar put on paper whatever he thinks; he does not prisoner of observing literary principles and he never wants to compose poetry with figurative and metaphoric language but whenever he wants it because of necessity of fiction, he could cope with. (Ashrafzadeh, 1992) Therefore,

<sup>1</sup> Peter Bruck et al. composed a scenario based on Conference of Birds

Attar only thinks of explaining his theosophical theories and does not comply with Rhyme and meter and what Jacobsen called poeticalness. On the other hand, Carlyle (1956) on writing style of Dante asserted phrases and thoughts that issued from his mind are real, simple, and full of honesty and strength. In his words, an honesty, and unexpected truth, focus and incredible compression of meanings can be observed. According to Carlyle (1956), Dante's language is concise and coherent; moreover, no words in his works can be altered or deleted, and this feature caused that concept of his poetry won't be understandable without explanation and comment. Although, this feature is only in content level but its effectiveness scope also expands to form; but, Dante's aim in the term of form is to create a simple, thrifty, and concise language. However, the fact is that Dante founded Italian language with creating this work in an era when Italy did not have any official language. Reason of popularity of his language in *Divine Comedy* is utilizing ordinary people language in his thoughts. Dante himself stated that: "... I achieved what I wanted, it means I could make available for everybody whatever was not understandable for the public through utilizing people's language instead of Latin." (*Divine Comedy*, 2001; V1, P33) From the above discussion, the results show that both, Dante and Attar, attempted to bring up deep concepts (Mysticism and Islam in Attar, Christianity and Greek-Aristotle philosophy in Dante) in a concise and simple language not only for intellectuals but also for populace. As a result, it might be true to know language of this two poets as easy yet difficult to imitate.

#### 4. DIVINE COMEDY AND CONFERENCE OF BIRDS: DRAMATIC VERSES

One of the similar and important features of *Divine Comedy* and *The Conference of Birds* is the debates and conversations which have noticeable frequency in these two works. Poornamdarani (1994) mentioned this following point: "The Conference of Birds, in both main story and in subsidiary tales, disagreement between two subjects lead to controversy over a common action of "debate" or "conversation" and finally one party overcome the other." Conversations and debates among birds in describing their spiritual status and ahead valleys associate real players that Dante companion them in his journey. Fergusson (1965) also suggested that dramatic and dialectic nature of work caused realism and complexity of Dante's poetry. However, there is a difference between conversation of *The Conference of Birds* and *Divine Comedy* that is of the aims of creators of these conversation in verse. In *The Conference of Birds* conversation means some kind of debate between two characters that ends with victory of a side and defeat of the other (as in main tale of the story level, Hoopoe with his logic and argumentation method is always win). In *Divine Comedy*, the aim of Dante for contacting spirits is to get information about their temporal life and terrestrial destiny. Hence, Dante acts passive in this case and simply is a listener; his presence is neither a barrier to their current condition, nor leads to alter their destiny. One of the other important points that can be mentioned here is the narration style of these two works. Narrator of story in *Divine Comedy* is first-person singular, hence narrator in here is also hero. Hildick (1968) expressed there are two types of narrative for first-person singular: first verbal first-person singular, and secondly, written first-person singular. It seems that what presented in *Divine Comedy* is not written with the aim of writing by a narrator but presented only to tell a story. Based on Hildick's theory, this type of narration is done by a main character and the suspense is victimized by the effects of main events in a specific character. Therefore, it is important to consider the effect of events excluding suspense feeling to the reader. Hence, writer's personal emotions is considered as a vital factor in forming flow of a story. Dante worked the same way. Dante gave an individualistic nature to his work through narrating story in verbal first-person singular form and entering personal emotions. This individualism is absent in *The Conference of Birds*: narrator of story is third-person singular that sometimes the narrator gives drama rein to his players then they can talk about themselves; in fact, he quoted from them and therefore, he took a distance between himself and characters. In *The Conference of Birds*, collective spirit of birds portrayed and despite of initial sections, most of the time attempt to focus on spiritual state of whole birds. Maybe this approach in narration can be studied from Attar's view point as a Muslim writer who used divine teaching of Islam in composing his work. These doctrines stress on noticing individual trainings along with social treatments as correlative and evidence of this which is quoted by Prophet Mohammad that Motaghi Hendi quoted in *Kanz al-Ummal*: "The hand of God is with group" (Vol.1, Hadith 1030, 207). This is a point that was not neglected in watchful view of Attar and he shows this type of ideology through it. Although, this is true about Catholic Christianity and does not mean rejection of collective soul in Catholic (religion of Dante). Collective soul in Roman Catholic Church and general obedience of church is a doctrine which has always advertised in Catholic Christianity. Kung (2005) stated that in Roman Catholic religion a type of general theosophy in the favor of collective obedience of church has been founded that last till today and this obedience has become the main essence of Christianity. Although, it is necessary to note that in Dante's era (Thirteenth century) monasteries were replaced by universities and as a result religion mixed with science and classic thoughts. This incorporation of catholic religion with opinions of classic philosophers such as Aristotle who progressed religious thoughts toward rationalism and conceptual analysis; theology also exists in

Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the image of hell is affected by Aristotle; hence, it reflects an empirical insight of this philosopher in Dante's work.

## 5. CONCLUSION

*Divine Comedy* and *The Conference of Birds*, two dramatic verses of two great poets cannot be only subject of comparative studies in the terms of their contents but also in the terms of form. In contents of these works of arts, done journeys of disciples, monks, and masters of these disciples and final destination of this group can be notable including some similarities and dissimilarities. Along with this approach, form and language framework utilized by these poets can be considered and discussed writing style, poeticalness of work, narration styles, and utilized language of these two litterateurs; and also context study of these two works in form level has some similarities and dissimilarities.

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