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ATINER's Conference Paper Series
LIT2013-0828

**Tracing a Heroic Journey in a
Mystic Tale**

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URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

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ISSN 2241-2891
23/1/2014

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This paper should be cited as follows:

Nemat Tavousi, M. (2013) "Tracing a Heroic Journey in a Mystic Tale"
Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: **LIT2013-0828**.

Tracing a Heroic Journey in a Mystic Tale

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Abstract

Following Sassanid's collapse (fairly 651A.C), Islamic Mysticism based on Shi'e discipline, strongly affected Persian literature and Iranian Arts. Poetry became one of the most useful expressions of mystic's inner experiences. Great Iranian Sufi mentors shared their esoteric experiences wrapped in anecdotes or tales in verses. Among all, 'Attar (1145-1146 /1221 fairly) was a great mentor and a marvelous story-teller who exploited material not only from specifically Sufi sources but also from older ascetic legacies such as mythological motives. An outstanding example of his works entitled *Zan-e-Pārsā* (The Pious Woman) appeared in *Ilāhināme*. The uniqueness of this tale could be attributed to its protagonist, the heroin. While Campbell claimed the hero's journey in heroic journey is usually male, in this tale, there was a woman undertaking a heroic journey. She had been summoned to the journey transforming her spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of ordinary home to a zone unknown. The hero's sex elaborated the complexity of events and the journey. The complexity rooted in paradoxical aspects of heroin in creating problems and solving them as well; her celestial beauty awakened the men's inner dragons who aimed to destroy her spiritual power, but she herself defeated those dragons. She, simultaneously, represented two parts of creation, light and darkness which are the origin of existence giving birth of two parts of *Kun* (becoming) according to *Ebn-e 'Arabi*'s thoughts. Consequently she possessed two aspects of spiritualities, alike the duality of divine essence of god: kindness and hostility, beauty and glory. In this regard, among heroes in mystic tales, the pious woman is the manifestation of a complete hero whom had been granted the boon.

Keywords: Sufi, *Nafs*, heroic journey, mystic, dragon killing

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Introduction

Following Sassanid's collapse (fairly 651 A.C), the great Persian Empire had been torn into pieces governed by Arab rulers. For centuries, the new governors tried every possible means transforming Iranian into obedient citizens. To detach Iranian from their ancient culture, Arab governors had banned Iranian speaking Persian language for two centuries¹. Seemingly, for two centuries Iranians were lost in the dust of the conquerors' hors-galloping. Their cultural heritages had been stolen as well as their identity; they could hardly have found any orientation.

Gradually, local Iranian governments were established² in different parts of Iran.³ They all attempted to revive Iranian heritages, but there were always too much threat and violence to preserve their achievements for a long time.

However, Iranian could manage to overcome the chaos as soon as Iranian movements, including political and cultural one's formed and affected even conquerors. More than any Iranian movements, Islamic Mysticism based on Shi'e disciplines, strongly affected Persian literature and Iranian Arts. Poetry became one of the most useful expressions of a mystic's inner experiences. Therefore Persian mystic-poet created literary masterpieces and wrote great pieces on mystics in different linguistic styles to share their esoteric experiences wrapped in anecdotes or tales. Among all of them 'Attar was not only a great mentor but a marvelous story-teller and his poetry inspired many Sufi poets.

Farid-al-din 'Attar (1130-1230) was born in Nishapour, in north-east of Iran. There is disagreement over the exact dates of his birth and death, but several sources confirm that he lived about 100 years. He is traditionally said to have been killed by Mongol invaders⁴.

There is no detail on 'Attar's life events, even the event resulted in his acquaintance with the concept of mysticism has been mixed with legends⁵, like the other mentors of mysticism. Interestingly although 'Attar was a great Sufi and poet, and a master in narrative, he was not well known as a poet in his own

¹There are reports about brutal reaction of new governors in case of even knowing Persian language. In some cases those who knew Persian language were condemned to be cut their tongues. For more information see Abdoul-Hossain Zarrinkoub, *Do Qarn Sokout*(Tehran: Soxan, 1999).

²including *Tāhirid dynasty*(821–873), *Saffārid dynasty*(861–1003), *Sāmānid dynasty*(819–999), *Ziyārid dynasty*(928–1043), *Buyid dynasty*(934–1055).

³Bertold Spuler, *Iran: in fruh -islamischer zeit*, trans. into Persian by: Javad Falatori (Tehran: Bolkah-e Tarjome Va Nasr-e Ketab, 1970), 12-45.

⁴Farid-al-Din 'Attar, *Illāhināme*, Introduction by Foad Rohani (Tehran: Zovar,1997), five.

⁵Here is the legend: 'Attar practiced as an herbal-medicine in his pharmacy during 12 century. Once a dervish entered his pharmacy, and murmured sacred words. 'Attar was too busy to pay attention to him and ignored him. Dervish told: "How will you die?" 'Attar answered: "Like you." Dervish asked him: "Can you die like me?!" 'Attar's reply was positive. Then Dervish put his wooden bowel under his head, uttered Allah and died. 'Attar astonished, left his pharmacy and followed mysticism.

lifetime, except at his home town; however his greatness was not discovered until the 15th century¹.

In explaining his thoughts, 'Attar exploited material not only from specifically Sufi sources but also from older ascetic legacies. His heroes are for the most part Sufis and ascetic, however, he introduced stories based upon historical chronicles, collections of anecdotes, and all types of high-esteemed literature.

All great teachers of the world usually adopt a symbolical form of expression, such as a story or a legend, when they have pointed out the keys of seeking the souls. These forms could give a key to the one who is ready to understand and simultaneously interest the one who is not yet ready. 'Attar was one of these great teachers who could elaborate story-telling techniques and even mythological motifs in favor of mysticism concept brilliantly.

'Attar is a poet with so many works. However, thirty works by him have survived, including *Mantic-at-tare* (The Conference of Birds), *Tazkeratul, Ilāhi-nāme* (Book of God), etc. In *Ilāhi-nāme*, 'Attar framed his mystical teaching in various stories in which Caliph tells his six sons, who are kings themselves. The first one is captivated by a virgin princess, and his father tells him the adventure of a beautiful and virtuous woman attracted several men unintentionally and survived miraculously by their abuse².

This tale will be discussed in next lines. The uniqueness of it can be attributed to its protagonist, the heroine who undertook a heroic journey. Every heroic journey is about growth and passage. Joseph Campbell described the hero's journey as occurring in a cycle consisting of three phases: Departure, where the hero leaves his comfortable and familiar world and venture into the darkness of unknown, Initiation where the hero is subjected to a series of tests in which he/she must prove his character and Return, in which the hero brings the boon of his quest back for the benefit of his people.³

According to Campbell, women typically present creation and ultimate wisdom and therefore do not need to make a journey. And if a woman does go on a quest, traditionally, it is to find her prince or mate. However in next lines this suggestion will be challenged. Therefore it should be enlightened whose journey can be interpreted as a heroic journey in this tale. Based on Campbell suggestions of a hero's characteristic who is the hero in this tale?

To answer these questions the stages of heroic journey will be examined through the female character's life events. The degree of the compatibility of these two may reach us to a conclusion.

¹ Hehimut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul, Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid-al-Din Attar*, trans by John O'Kane with Editorial of Brend Radtke (Boston: Brill Leiden, 2003), Introduction.

² Farid-al-Din 'Attar Nishapuri, *Illāhināme*, Introduction, Appendix and Corrections by Mohammad Reza Shafi'ee Kadkani, (Tehran: Soxan, 2008), 131-144.

³ Joseph Campbell, *the Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (California: New World Library, 200).

Reading between Lines

Departure

At the very beginning of the story, a married couple undertook their journeys separately. The husband headed Mecca by his own choice to accomplish a religious obligation. All believers absorb divine knowledge in different ways compatible with their personal experience on different aspects of religious teaching. Those who follow Shari'at¹, religious regulation and laws, try to do their best in fulfilling these regulation and law, on the right time and with most possible perfection. Thus the man as a follower of Shari'at decided to leave her home town participating in the most spiritual experience of every Muslim in Mecca.

But the wife; the pious woman, was forced to leave her hometown. Once her brother in-law, whom was supposed to take care of her during his brother's absence, saw her face accidentally. He became enchanted by her celestial beauty and madly asked her making-love with him. It seemed that her beauty possessed him so that he decided to betray his own brother. She refused him severely. To revenge her, the brother set a conspiracy and accused her of adultery. Consequently she had been trailed and condemned to be stoned. Half alive, she left alone in a desert.

Qazali (fairly 1072-1112), a great Sufi writer of Iran, has said that entering the spiritual path is just like shooting an arrow at a point one cannot see, somewhere in darkness without knowing where it is about going to hit². The main female character in this tale, ventured forth from the world of common day into a region unknown likewise the shooting an arrow. This point is the beginning of her journey. The situation she had been trapped in forced her to undertake a mysterious journey.

While her husband headed to a holy place for purifying his soul by his choice, the woman was tortured to death and dismissed from her home-town. She had no plan, no motivation, and no ambition to undertake a voyage. To be specific she had no choice except accepting the call to adventure. Apparently, god's will had summoned her and transformed her spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of ordinary home to a zone unknown.

The first encounter of the heroin journey was with a protective figure, like every hero of a heroic journey. A nomadic Arab found her and sheltered her with cherishment to regain her health. He provided her with amulets against the dragon forces she was about to pass³.

However, as soon as the woman regained her health her beauty flourished. Being enchanted by her beauty, the Arab fell in love with her and proposed her to marry him. She warned him of god's sanction and reminded him she was a

¹According to Sufism, one should pass three stages successfully till being absorbed by Divine Essence: *Shari't* (Religious Law), *Tariqat* (Personal Experiences), *Haqiqat* (Truth).

²Ahmad Qazali. *Savaneho Al-Oshaq* Correction by Helmut Ritter. (Tehran: Markaz-e Nashere Daneshgahi, 1989), 73.

³Campbell, *the Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 69.

married woman. Realizing his misbehavior, the Arab conversed and harnessed his awakening dragon whose fire aimed at his faith and woman's virtue.

In every heroic journey, hero might be challenged by dragons and supernatural creatures. Whenever mythological motifs appear in mystic tales they have been encoded to present the connotative meaning of the words. Referring mystic glossary, *Nafs*, can be fairly translated into ego, has been considered as a sleepy dragon or demon equal to a diabolic force. People have always been warned of *Nafs* as a potential diabolic force that is necessary to be controlled by wisdom or fear of god. Otherwise its awakening resulted in excessive desire which may end up in chaos. *Eblis*, Satan, lives in *Nafs* and can control it, because he had stepped on it. The creation of *Nafs* was from the ground on which *Eblis* passed through. But heart was created from the ground on which *Eblis* was not stepped on ever. Therefore the presence of *Eblis* caused *Nafs* adopted vicious and unpleasant manners of *Eblis*¹. The excessive men's desire for love-making with the heroin can be read as a dragon-force in this tale. Therefore, the heroin struggled several times with dragon- natured-forces, though never being materialized.

Nevertheless, another dragon was awakened, the Arab's slave one. In spite of all his sexual demand of the woman, the slave failed too. Frustrated and obsessed of being rejected, the slave arranged a scene to accuse the woman for murder. He killed the Arab's new-born baby and put the baby's bloody cloth under the woman's pillow. Finding the cloth, all the domestics pointed the guilt figure at the woman. She asked the Arab judge her by his wisdom rather tricky evidences. Being informed of shameless demand of the slave, the Arab convinced her innocence. However, he asked her leave his home, because she was not welcomed by the rest of his family anymore.

It seemed that she had already crossed the first threshold, interned darkness, the unknown, and danger: just as the paternal watch is suppressing danger to the infant and beyond the protection of her society there is danger to the member of the tribe. The usual person is more than content, he is even proud, to remain within the indicated bounds, and popular belief gives every reason to fear so much as the first step into the unexpected.² The adventure is always and everywhere a passage beyond the veil of known into unknown; the powers that watch at the boundary are dangerous fades³.

Initiation

Once having traversed the threshold, the ordeal is a deepening of the first threshold and question is still in balance: can the ego put itself to death?⁴

On her wandering she met a young man who was condemned to be hanged for not paying his tax. She paid his tax and rescued him. But her beauty enchanted him. The young man had been refused too. Lust hunted him so much

¹Taqi Pournamdariyan, *Raz av Dastanhay-e Ramzi*, (Tehran: Sherkat-e Emtesharat-e Elmi va Farhangi, 1985), 136.

²Campbell, 77-78.

³Ibid., 82.

⁴Ibid., 109.

that he claimed the woman his slave and sold her to a merchant. She resisted hard but neither the young man nor the merchant paid attention to her words. The merchant forced her to get on board as his slave. Her voyage became more complicated; she had to pass over the sea.

Crossing over water is to change from one physical state or plane to another; it is also a metaphor for separation, as in crossing the sea or river of death¹. This explains the exaltation of her power in the middle of the sea.

On the board, the passengers and the crew, who were enchanted by her celestial beauty, decided to rape her one by one. Being entrapped, she prayed god to save her from that very diabolic plan and faded. God sent a miracle: fire burnt all of them into ashes without any harm to the woman or damage to the ship or goods. Traditionally, in ancient Iran whenever someone had been accused of committing a crime, to prove his innocence the suspect should have passed through fire, this act was called fire ordeal. If one was innocent, fire would not harm him at all², like *Siyāvash* the Iranian epic hero whose life story is an adaptation from life-death-rebirth story of a vegetation god.

As *Siyāvash* was extremely handsome, *Sudābe*, her step-mother, fell in love with him at first sight. She tried to win him with seductive schemes, but *Siyāvash* delicately rejected all of her advances. Frustrated and frightened of scandal, she accused him of trying to seduce her. To reinforce her allegations, she manipulated King *Key Kāvus*, her husband and *Siyāvash*'s father, by arranging a scene to feign a false miscarriage. Though her claims were debunked by King *Key Kāvus*' wizard and courtiers, her perseverance made King *Key Kāvus* suspicious of *Siyāvash*. Consequently, *Siyāvash* had to prove his innocence by walking through fire, a common practice among ancient Iranians to test a man's assertions, as they believe that fire would not harm innocent³.

The woman could survive from the fire, so she was the only innocent on the board. Hereby she passed another test successfully.

Finally the ship launched a safe land; meanwhile she decided to appear disguised a young man in front of those might meet. This situation can be read as the denial of the sex by the woman in favor of her own spiritual safety. Beyond the confines of the visible world the heroin tried to step into inward, to define her identity again, to be born again. When she met the king in disguise, told her story and offered him the ship and its goods. In return she asked the king to build her a temple. The king accepted her offer as well as her demand. She inhabited in the temple, where she was to be quickened by the collector of who and what she was, namely dust and ashes unless immortals. Her female identity with a celestial beauty was suppressed; she separated herself from rest of the world by her choice. She achieved assurance through encountering hard conditions. She was the one who observed fire function personally. She

¹J.C. Copper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: 1979), 188.

²Mohammad Reza Sarafi, 'Azmoun-e Atash'(the Fire Ordeal) in *Journal of Literature and Humanities Faculty of Shahid Bahonar University*, vol. 8&9, (winter2000 & spring 2001).

³Maryam Nemat Tavousi, 'Siyāvoš as a Vegetation Deity', in *Iranian Studies*, vol. 41. No2 (April 2008).

experienced both the stable stage of spiritual exaltation and unstable physical emotions. She accepted the religious truth through personal esoteric experiences. Last thing but the most important one, she was the one who observed Truth just by inner eye.

As crossing over the sea points to crossing from one condition of life to another, from one spiritual stage to a higher one for her situation this can be signified that she crossed *Tariqat* threshold and entered the threshold of Truth.

As soon as the king understood death angle was going to visit him, he declared the woman in disguise, his heir. Pretending to pick up a noble maiden to propose, she gathered all wives and daughters of court members. On their gathering she revealed her true sex.

In every heroic journey, the mystical marriage with the queen of the world represents the hero's total mastery of life, beside the testing of the hero which was preliminary of his ultimate experience and deed, were symbolical of those crises of realization by means of which his consciousness came to be amplified and made capable of ending the full possession of the mother destroyer¹. However it seems the queen of the world had been incarnated within the hero herself in this tale, there was no need to a mystical marriage.

In this case the nobles asked her to choose someone for the throne. At this time she was the one who had been granted a gift, all her praying was accepted by God, she was entitled *Mostajāb-al- dave*, fairly can be translated ever-answered prayer.

Return

It seemed the heroin mission had been accomplished, through her grace and it was time when she should have returned with her life-transmuting trophy to her home town.

The full round of every heroic journey requires that hero shall at this point begin the labor of bringing boon, such as wisdom, the golden fleece, etc., back into her home town, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community². Although she herself did not come back to her home town, her fame reached there. Meanwhile men, who did the meanest thing to make love with her, were magically punished: her brother in law, the nomadic Arab's slave and the young man who sold the woman as his slave became blind and paralyzed except their tongues.

Blindness, in this tale, is an analogy of being lost. Mohammad, the prophet said that God created his creature in darkness, then scattered upon them his light. Everybody received that light found his way, but those who were prevented from that light, ended their lives in disappointment and wandering³.

However, her fame as an ever-answer prayer lady motivated her husband, the nomadic Arab and the young man's mother to take these miserable men to

¹Campbell, 120-121

²Ibid, 193.

³Mohi-al Din Ebne Arabi, *Deraxt-e Hassti*, trans. into Persian by Golbaba Saeedi, (Tehran: Shafi'ee, 2001), 136.

a journey visiting this mysterious lady. She accepted them without revealing her identity, but first she asked them tell the truth that was the origin of their misery. They told their stories one by one; on their conspiracy, murder and betrayal. Truth had been revealed. She forgave them and prayed for their healing.

Finally she claimed her husband the king and the Arab his adviser (*vezir*), for every successful king needs a wise assistance. She put an end on the chaos in her life, the small world; *Jahan saqir*, and dedicated her life to god's praying.

Conclusion

The heroin, in this tale, presents a complex version of hero who undertook a full round of a heroic voyage. The complexity rooted in paradoxical aspects of heroin. Her celestial beauty awakened men's dragon-natured forces. To overcome these diabolic forces she struggled severely and had been obliged to experience difficulties. Every time she suffered to death, but survived. Her experiences in life was worse than death, yet she go through them.

While the majority of the heroes of Attar's tales are god's men who can defeat devils temptations appearing in various forms, in this tale there is a woman could manage to defeat devil in many faces. The woman's faith and resistance resulted in saving her virtue, and her resistance caused her exaltation above all other male characters.

Although Campbell points out that the initiator in heroic journey is usually a male character, there is a female character that had given her life over her virtue, done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. She was the one who risked his life for ideal and passed each stage (Departure, Initiation, and Return) successfully and became hero. At the end she could give up completely all attachments to her personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resisted the self-annihilation that is prerequisite to rebirth.

According to Ebn-e Arabi the existence origins in two elements, gives birth of two parts of *Kun*, fairly means becoming. These two elements are light and darkness¹. She represents these two parts simultaneously. She is not only a chaser-hunter, but a savior as well. Two opposite aspects of existence have nesting within her soul. She also possess two aspects of spiritualities, alike the duality of divine essence of god: kindness and hostility, beauty and glory. The Devil has just one eye spiritually. Those who follow him are blind in other eye. In other word devil disciple can just see God's hostility and glory rather his kindness and this will defeat him. In this regard, among heroes in mystic tales, the pious woman is a manifestation of a complete hero. She truly represented creation herself. And at the end she was the one who became the master of the world and the champion of things becoming, not of thing become.

¹Ibid.,129

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