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Illustrating a classic – revisiting artworks on 'The Conference of the birds' or the 'Mantiq al tair' by Attar of Nishapur

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Abstract :

This article traces the content and artworks in the context of Persian poet Farid-ud-Din Attar's iconic work Mantiq-al-tair or Conference of the Birds which has influenced other mystic poets. The work is present as printed versions in libraries, private collections and as illustrated manuscripts in Persian in museums across the world. The focus here is on collections with illustrations. The work continues to inspire generations of readers and translators who make it available for the non-Persian knowing enthusiast. The meeting of the birds is beautifully captured by different artists. The meeting and subsequent flight of the birds is the very basis of the work. One can see the peacock, the hoopoe among many other birds. Also the article describes the *Simurgh* or the mythical bird chosen by the birds of the world as their king. One can get the essence of the *Mantiq-al-tair* and understand this famous allegorical poem through the artworks depicted along with the storyline in the article as seen in various sources.

Keywords : birds, *simurgh*, *simorgh*, healing bird, King of birds, hoopoe, peacock, conference of the birds, parliament of the birds, Attar of Nishapur, Farid-ud-Din Attar, Persian poetry, Sufism.

Introduction : the Mantiq al tair or Conference of the birds

The *Mantiq-al tair* or *Maqamat ut tuyur* is a Persian poem by Farid-ud-Din Attar composed in 1177 A.D. It is a conversation or a conference between birds who are looking for a king. The poet is usually referred to by his pen name as 'Attar' of Nishapur.

The story is in an allegorical poem form intertwined with many sub stories which describes human predicaments and limitations. The poem has around 4500 lines which begins with the birds of the world meeting. They realise they need a king to guide them. The hoopoe is accepted as a leader to guide and inspire them. The hoopoe suggests that they should find the *simurgh*, legendary bird. But for reaching the *simurgh* they have to cross seven valleys; the valley of quest, valley of love, valley of knowledge, valley of detachment, valley of unity, valley of wonderment and valley of poverty and annihilation. The hoopoe leads the flock and they begin their journey. Many birds die when they begin their journey; when they listen to the description of the valleys; some perish due to fear, illness, thirst and hunger. As

per the hoopoe, the most significant trait to be discarded is the attachment to the self which can be achieved by shedding the Ego; this is done when the birds reach the last Valley of Poverty and Annihilation. Finally only thirty birds make it to the Kaf, the valley of the *simurgh*. The gatekeeper opens the gate after much hesitation. Then something surprising takes place. The birds come to understand that they themselves are the *simurgh*.

They were startled

They were amazed

and still more astonished

as they advanced

They saw how they themselves

Were the great Simorgh

All along, Simorgh was in fact

Si. thirty, *morgh*, birds

.....Sholeh Wolpe.

The poem can actually be taken to be comprising of humans (represented as birds) with faults and who are seeking the Divine. The *Mantiq al tair* can be taken as an allegorical tale about the quest of the human soul for meaning and self knowledge and finally merging with the Divine. The necessity of destructing the self runs through the entire poem. It might have been the portrayal of the seeker, Farid ud Din Attar himself and his spiritual yearning.

The 'Conference of the Birds' has the Sufi doctrine at its core with the hoopoe telling the birds about the journey they have to undertake the arduous and challenging journey through the seven valleys to reach the Mountains of Kaf where their king, the *simurgh* resides. The hoopoe is thus the guide and leader of the birds (who is wiser and considered a bird of virtue; who was the confidante of King Solomon and who delivered messages to Queen Sheba as mentioned in the 7th century Arabic Holy Quran). In this work the word *sheikh* refers to a spiritual leader. Thus the hoopoe is a sheikh leading the birds. It is pertinent to mention that there are seven stages in the life of a Sufi called *maqamahs*. Many human aspects are depicted through the birds. The nightingale is the lover and the finch is a coward. The parrot wants to be free and the peacock speaks of his beauty and wants Paradise. The duck speaks of its purity and the patridge does not wish to fly and the homa bird wants the world to 'bask in his magnificence'. All the birds make many excuses as to why they do not want to embark on such a journey, but the hoopoe offers wise answers and parables to them to give them the confidence needed to leave the familiar. In the work 'Conference of the Birds', God is represented as a monarch or king. The birds undergo many trials during the journey and give up their desire for earthly possessions. The poem is in couplets which has 22 syllables with rhyming at the 11th and 22nd syllable.

There have been many translations to this epic and iconic work by Farid ud Din Attar. The earliest English translation of an abridged version of the work was in 1889 by Edward Fitzgerald – *A bird's eye view of the Bird Parliament*. In 1954, Charles Stanley Nott translated *The Conference of the Birds* published by James Press, London. Later translations include *The Speech of the Birds* by Peter Avery published by Islamic Texts Society in 1998, *Conference of the birds – a seeker's journey to God* by Harvey and Masani published by Weiser Books in 2001. In 2009, Farah K Behbehani used Jali Diwani calligraphy, an ornamental cursive script developed by the Ottomans to illustrate the stories and journeys of the birds depicting their name in Arabic. The book was called *The Conference of the Birds a study of Farid ud Din Attar's poem using Jali Diwani Calligraphy*. In 2011, *The Conference of the Birds* by Dick Davis and Afkham Darbani (originally published in 1984 by Penguin Books, London) was republished in 2011 along with the prologue and epilogue. The same work reedited as *The Canticle of the birds* by Diane de Seller Editeur, was published

in 2014 with 200 illustrations. In 2012, *The Conference of the Birds* was adapted by Alexis York Lumbard and illustrated by DEMI by Wisdom Press, Indiana. In 2017, W W Norton and Co, London published *The Conference of the Birds* by Sholeh Wolpe. *The Conference of the Birds* adapted by Peter Sis, Czech illustrator was also published with many illustrations in 2011. 'The birds journey to Mount Kaf' by Hooda Qaddumi with illustrated images by Vanessa Hodgkinson painted on ceramic tiles was published in 2006 by Saqi Books in English. There are ebook versions of the work available online. Iranian illustrator Negin Ehbesabian worked on a Turkish adapted version of *The Mantiq*, translated by Zehra T. Ozbursali and published by Verita Kitap, Istanbul, Turkey, where the illustrations are in mixed media; a combination of collage, pencil drawings, watercolor, gouache and other materials like magazine scraps and disposed materials inspired by Persian miniatures and by use of symbols in 2017; as reported in the Financial Tribune - an Iranian English Economic daily. A Punjabi translation was published by Gracious Books in 2018 called *Panchhiyan Di Mazlish*. In 1995, Anne Fairbairn did a 'recasting' in 3000 words, not exactly a translation, of the 'Mantiq' called 'An Australian version of Attars Conference of the Birds'. A French translation *La Conference des Oiseaux* of 2012 by Manjeh Nouri, Swiss Islamicist, was published by CERF Publications, Paris, which was adapted for stage. Thus this timeless work continues to inspire and mesmerize writers of every generation.

Once on a time from all the Circles seven

Between the stedfast Earth and rolling Heaven

THE BIRDS, of all Note, Plumage, and Degree,

That float in Air, and roost upon the Tree;

And they that from the Waters snatch their Meat,

And they that scour the Desert with long Feet;

Birds of all Natures, known or not to Man,

Flock'd from all Quarters into full Divan,

On no less solemn business than to find

Or choose, a Sultan Khalif of their kind....

....excerpt from translation by Edward FitzGerald, 1889.

Farid ud-Din Attar: a mystic poet from Iran

Farid ud Din Attar was a poet from Persia (b.1145 d.1221 A.D). The word Attar means 'distilled scent'. His actual name was Abu Hamid Abu Bakr Ibrahim. With the pen name of Farid ud-Din Attar he has written lyrical poems and prose. He was from Nishapur, a major city of medieval Khosaran in North Eastern Iran (historically Persia) during the Seljuk period. He was the son of a prosperous chemist who received a good education in medicine, theosophy and Arabic. He used to attend to customers who shared their problems with him. This affected him deeply. An incident occurred in which a fakir commented on the 'opulence' of the pharmacy. He quit the pharmacy, joined Sheikh Rukn ud Din Akkaf of the Kubraviyyah order. He later travelled to Baghdad, Basra, Mecca, Medina, Damascus Turkistan, India among other places searching for deeper meanings. He experienced life at khanakahs and collected verses and sayings of famous Sufis. He came back to Nishapur and reopened his pharmacy and started contributing to highlight Sufi thought. There are conflicting views about his Sufi leanings as he was born to the Sunni sect, but during his time Sufism was a part of the social milieu. He read nearly 1000 works written by Islamic scholars and then only proceeded to use his Sufi knowledge and poetic genius to compose the 'Mantiq al tair'. He was a poet and theoretician who

influenced Persian poetry. Sufism is associated with “selfless experiencing and actualization of the Truth by means of love and devotion” The spiritual path on the way to God is called *tarigot*. Sufism is understood as “the esoteric dimension of the Islamic faith, the spiritual path to mystical union with God”. As per Sufism, God only exists and everything is his shadow and the soul is trapped within the cage of the body. Attar’s works are full of Sufi ideas. And it is taken that he was a Sufi; it is not very clear about who indoctrinated Attar, because Sufis maintain that one cannot automatically become a Sufi, instruction into a Sufi order is compulsory. Attar might have been instructed in dreams as many Sufis were by Sufi masters who had passed away. According to Rumi, Attar was instructed by the Sufi master Hallaj who had been publicly executed in 922 A.D in Baghdad.

Figure 1 : Statue of Farid ud Din Attar, Nishapur, Iran.

Attar composed lyrical poems in Islamic mysticism, wrote about the lives of saints and sayings of mystics. His works include the whole movement of Sufism, which is the esoteric dimension of the Islamic faith, the spiritual path to mystical union with God; the works include his Diwan, Mantiq-al-tair, Mosibat nama, Ilahinama, Jawahirnama, Sarh-al-qaib. He was a major effect on Jalal ud Din Rumi (1207 -73 A.D) and Sanai of Ghaznavi (d. 1130). Farid ud Din Attar lived during the Seljuk rule from Khosaran, of a Turkish speaking dynasty. The poet was killed in an invasion by the Mongols. His tomb is located at Nishapur. April 13 is observed as Attar National Day in Iran. The Mantiq al Tair remains one of his most celebrated works. There have been theatrical versions also of the work which were published in France in addition to translations and illustrated books in English. Cemal Aydin, who translated the 'Mantiq' to Turkish which was published by Turkish Literature Foundation in 2016, mentions that the work is a 'reference book for the world's intellectuals along with psychologists and psychiatrists who want to understand the human spirit and character.'



Figure 2: Farid ud Din Attar’s tomb, Nishapur, Iran.

The Simurgh : a note on the benevolent bird

The **Simurgh** is a mythical healing bird from Persia. It is sometimes compared to the Phoenix from Greek mythology or understood as the “collective consciousness”. A much revered bird, originally a raptor, falcon, eagle or sparrowhawk, the word literally means ‘30 birds’ in Persian. Usually depicted as a winged creature in bird shape who can carry off an elephant. The *Simurgh* is depicted as a peacock with the head of a dog, claws of a lion and sometimes with the face of a human. The bird is female and purifies the land and water and symbolizes the unity between the Earth and Sky. The *simurgh* is mentioned in Sufi poetry, the *Shahnameh*, and found on Umayyad coinage. The *khanakah* of Nadir Divan-Begi (17th century) from Bukhara was a centre for Sufi meetings. The entrance arch shows the Simurgh and the Celestial Sun as in the moment of spiritual illumination as mentioned in the *Mantiq-al-tair*. In recent times it is a central figure in the Coat of Arms of Uzbekistan and on the flag of the Tat people presently living in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia.



Figure 3: The Simurgh on the madrasa of Diwan-Begi, Bukhara, Uzbekistan.



Figure 4: The Simurgh in an illustration, page from a Shahnameh, Qazvin, 16th century, L A C M A, Los Angeles, U.S A.

Ah, the Simurgh, who is this wondrous being
 Who, one fated night, when time stood still,
 Flew over China, not a single soul seeing?
 A feather fell from this King, his beauty and his will,
 And all hearts touched by it were in tumult thrown.

Everyone who could, traced from it a liminal form;
 All who saw the still glowing lines were blown
 By longing like trees on a shore bent by storm.
 The feather is lodged in China’s sacred places,
 Hence the Prophet’s exhortation for knowledge to seek
 Even unto China where the feather’s shadow graces
 All who shelter under it — to know of this is not to speak.
 But unless the feather’s image is felt and seen
 None knows the heart’s obscure, shifting states
 That replace the fat of inaction with decision’s lean.
 His grace enters the world and molds our fates
 Though without the limit of form or definite shape,
 For all definitions are frozen contradictions not fit
 For knowing; therefore, if you wish to travel on the Way,
 Set out on it now to find the Simurgh, don’t prattle and sit
 On your haunches till into stiffening death you stray.
 All the birds who were by this agitation shook,
 Aspired to a meeting place to prepare for the Shah,
 To release in themselves the revelations of the Book;
 They yearned so deeply for Him who is both near and far,
 They were drawn to this sun and burned to an ember;
 But the road was long and perilous that was open to offer.
 Hooked by terror, though each was asked to remember
 The truth, each an excuse to stay behind was keen to proffer.

..... Raficq Abdulla

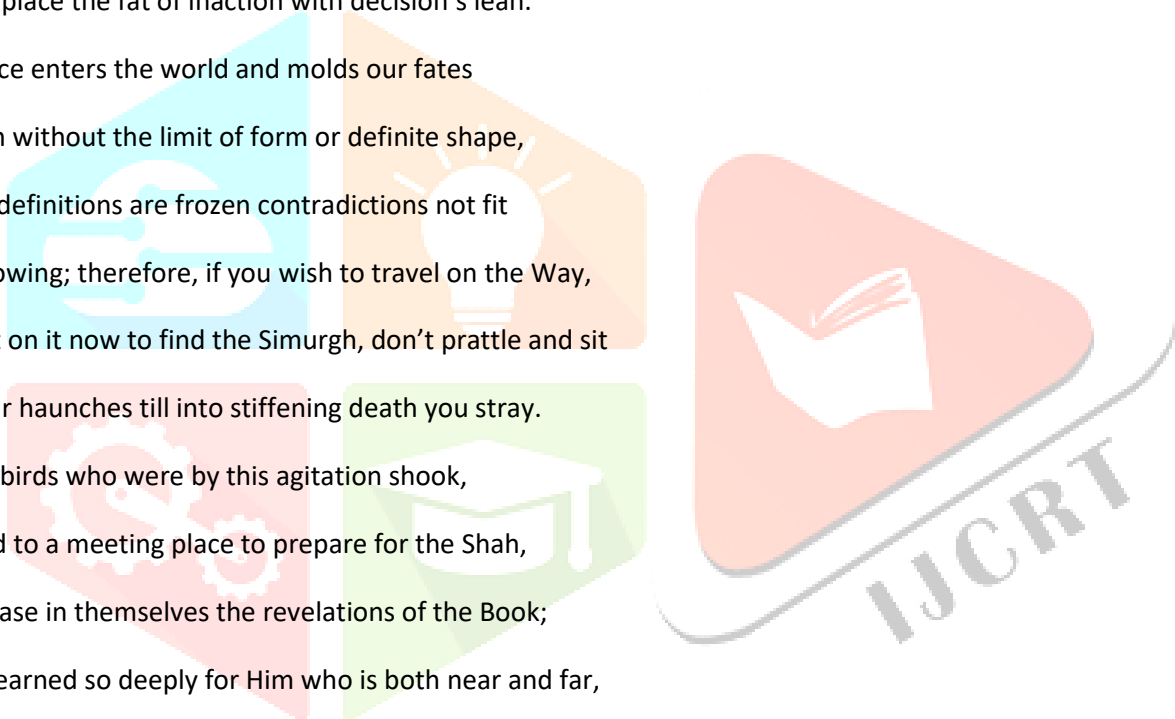




Figure 5: The Simurgh carrying Zal to his nest, illustration from Shahnameh, probably 16th century, Wellcome Images, U.K.

Illustrating the poem – paintings and drawings in different sources

A classic work like the 'Mantiq' has been read, translated and illustrated by different people and artists over time. The works are found in museums, libraries and private collections. A few illustrations found in manuscripts and on book covers are elucidated here. The British Museum, London has an illustrated manuscript (Add 7736), from late 15th century or early 16th century, which has very interesting images. The paintings are in later Herat style. The style is associated with painters like Kamal al Din Bahzad (d. 1536 A.D) who were patronized by Sultan Husayn Bayqara who ruled from Herat between 1469 and 1506 A.D, In the image (Figure 6), one can see the hoopoe conversing with the peacock.

Another illustrated Manuscript (63.210, folio 11r) of the *Mantiq* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York has an image of the birds gathered in an idyllic place. The birds have been separately enlarged for better viewing and clarity. One can see the peacock, the hoopoe, the eagle and ducks among others. The painting is opaque water-colour, gold and silver on paper, by artist Habibullah of Sava who was active between 1590 and 1610 A.D.

A folio from another manuscript of 1717 A.D from Turkey, at the Walters Art Museum, Maryland, U.S.A, (W 659.2698) depicts a meeting of the birds, made in ink and pigments on European laid paper.

The Wellcome Collection has a gouache painting (No. 582626i) made probably by a Persian artist depicting the birds. The Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford has a manuscript (Ms Eliot) 246) where the Folio No. 25v has an illustration of the Conference of the Birds. A book 'Conference of the Birds -selected Sufi poetry of Farid ud Din Attar' by Raficq Abdulla was published by Interlink Books in 2003 which features some illustrations from the manuscript at the British Library, London. The published books which have many illustrations are the ones by Peter Sis – *The Conference of the Birds* published by Penguin RandomHouse in 2011 and the luxury edition *The Canticle of the Birds – illustrated through Persian and Eastern Islamic Art*, published in 2014 by Diane De Selliers Editions with major

contribution by Dr. Michael Barry, art historian; having over 200 illustrations as already mentioned. The other translated versions too have interesting and different illustrations on their covers to depict *The Conference of the Birds*.

Next came the peacock, splendidly arrayed
In many coloured pomp, this he displayed
As if he were some proud self conscious bride
Turning with haughty looks from side to side.

.....Dick Davis.



Figure 6: Illustration, *Mantiq-al-tair*, Late 15th century – early 16th century, British Library, London.



Figure 7: Illustration, *Mantiq-al-tair*, early 18th century, Turkey, Walters Art Museum, Maryland, U.S.A

The world's birds gathered for their conference
 And said : ' Our conversation makes no sense
 All nations in the world require a king
 How is it we alone have no such thing?
 Only a kingdom can be justly run;
 We need a king and ust inquire for one.'

.....Dick Davis.



Figure 8: Illustration, *Mantiq-al-tair*, Late 15th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The hawk came forward with his head held high;
His beasts of grand connections filled the sky.
His talk was stuffed with armies, glory, kings.

.....Dick Davis.



Figure 9: Illustration, *Mantiq-al-tair*, Late 15th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The coy duck waddled from her stream and quacked
Now none of you can argue with the fact
That both in this world and the next I am
The purest bird that ever flew or swam..

....Dick Davis.



Figure 10: Illustration, *Mantiq-al-tair*, Late 15th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The pretty parrot was the next to speak,
Clothed all green, with sugar in her beak,
And round her neck acircle of pure gold,
Even the falcon cannot boast so bold
A loveliness - earth's variegated green
Is but the image of her feathers' sheen..

.....Dick Davis.



Figure 11: Illustration, *Mantiq-al-tair*, Late 15th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 12: Illustration, *Mantiq-al-tair*, Late 15th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.





Figure 13: Illustration from *Mantiq al Tair*, late 15th century, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, U.K.



Figure 14: Meeting of the birds, Wellcome Collection, London.

Some book covers of The Conference of the Birds are depicted, translated and published by various publishers. This timeless work by Farid ud-Din Attar from the 12th century continues to enthrall and inspire well into the 21st century.

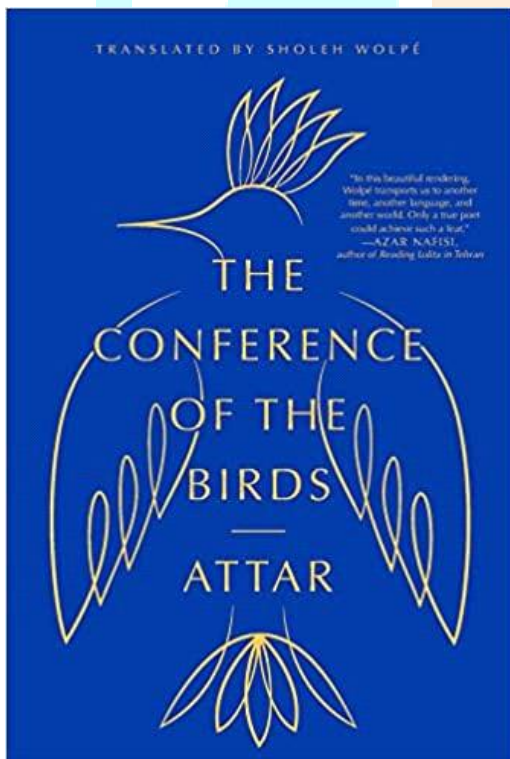


Figure 15

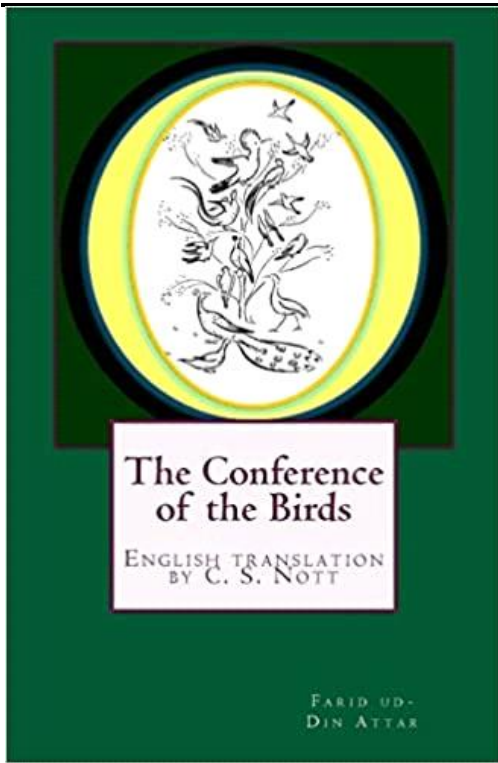


Figure 16

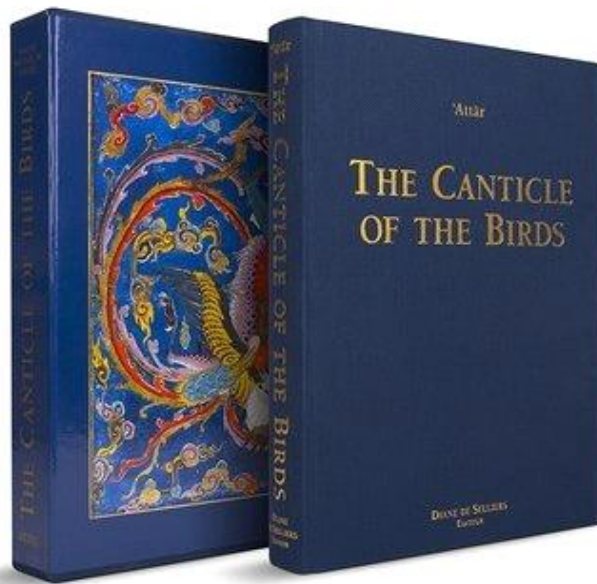


Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

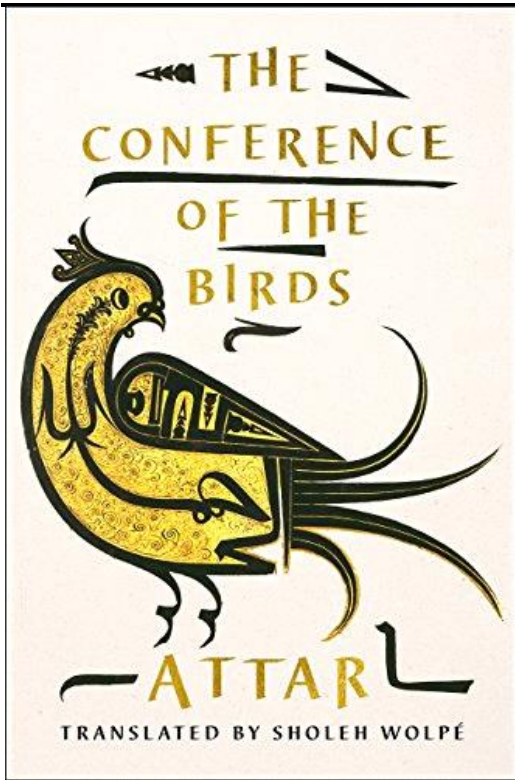


Figure 20



Figure 21

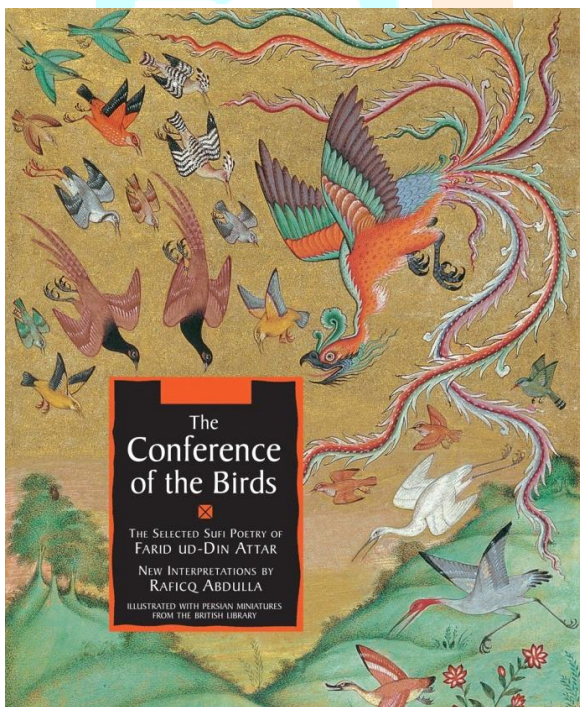
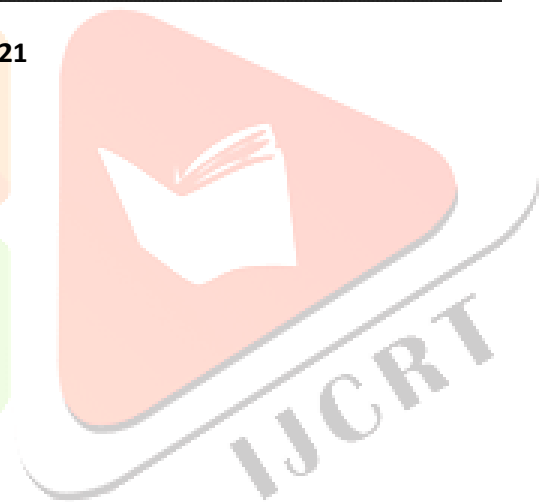


Figure 22



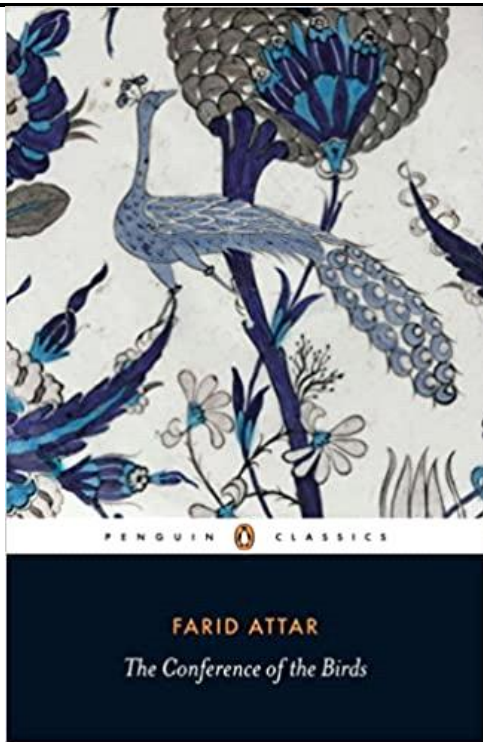


Figure 23

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