

The Saint of Faithfulness: Attār’s Odyssean Pious Woman

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Abstract

This article offers a detailed study of a story by one of the giants of Persian literature, Farid al-din Attār. It particularly focuses on the character of Attār’s “The Pious Woman”, who emerges as a symbol of faithfulness and discusses her significance as a character of mystical proportion and grandeur that also appears as personification of virtue in a world dominated by acquisitive and lascivious men. In many aspects, the Pious Woman reminds one of Penelope in Homer’s *The Odyssey* who is also celebrated for her faithfulness to her husband and for her patience and feminine virtues.

Keywords: Attār, *Ilāhi Namah*, Mysticism, Pious Woman, Persian literature.

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Introduction

Farid al-din Attār (1145-1221), also known as Attār of Nishāpur, is, undoubtedly, one of the most celebrated mystical poets of the Persian literary tradition whose works and thoughts have greatly influenced other prominent Sufi poets such as the Persian poet, Rumi. Attār has been referred to as one “amongst the greatest poets of Persia” whose “dimensions as a literary genius increase with the further investigation of his writings, which are still far from completely explained ...” (Arberry, 2000: v). Attār’s poetry is loaded with stories and anecdotes which ultimately express Attār’s mystical views and motifs. The protagonists of these stories are usually taken from different strata of society and various social groups. These include kings, viziers, executioners, sophies, mendicants, artisans and beggars. *Ilāhi Nāmāh* is one such story (Zarrinkoob, 1983: 162-3). It consists of 6500 verses. The work’s name refers to the poet’s “intention that it should open the ‘doors to the divine treasure’ (*dare ganje ilāhi*)” (Reinert 2010). There are 282 versified anecdotes and stories in *Ilāhi Nāmāh* which are mostly written in lucid and unadorned language except when Attār is describing the beauty of the beloved on which occasion he resorts to figurative language.

Ilāhi Namāh is a collection of stories in verse at the centre of which is a dialogue between a father and his sons. This dialogue appears as the skeleton of the story, and there are many subsidiary plots which contribute to the main action and add flesh to it. The allegorical aspects of the stories are illuminated and explained by the father in discussions between him and his sons. These discussions take the form of questions and answers. At the beginning of each section, one of the king’s sons pose a question which is followed by the king’s reply and a relevant story. In some aspects the whole story reminds one of Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)’s poems, “If” in which a father advises his son as how to become a man.

As the story unfolds in *Ilāhi Namāh*, the king summons his six sons and asks them to express a wish so he could grant them. Instead of

granting his sons' wishes, the king tries to show his sons how lowly, mean, materialistic and unworthy of attention their desires are. He wants his sons to set their goals and ambitions on higher and nobler values in life. This story enables Attār to explain some of his basic mystical views as opposed to people's mundane and trivial values in life (Forouzānfar, 1973: 95-100). This is an archetypal story which recurs in many oriental tales such as Sandbād and the story of the fortunate king in the second part of *Marzbān Nāmāh* in which the father advises his sons near his demise. The king in *Ilāhi Nāmāh* symbolizes the spirit of a perfect human being and his sons represent different kinds of people with different ideas and desires. The first son, for example, represents carnal desire and sensual pleasure. The king's other sons each represents one tendency and inclination of the human soul.

The stories in *Ilāhi Nāmāh* are more elaborate and longer than other stories in Attār's works. Among these sagas one can mention the story of "The Pious Woman", the tale of "The Prince of Balkh", and his daughter's love story and also the story of "The Son of Hāroon al-Rashid" (Forouzānfar, 1973: 95-100). In these stories Attār has tried to show that one must seek the truth of one's unattainable desires which have preoccupied our minds throughout history and form one crucial aspect of our psyche, in one's own self (a theme that also runs through the *Conference of the Birds*).

After the preliminary sections about monotheism, the blessings of the Prophet, resurrection and the spirit of man, the actual story starts. The king's first son opens the dialogue by expressing a wish. He has heard that the king of the Fairies has a magnificently beautiful and intelligent daughter. He thinks failure to marry this girl will lead him to insanity. His father then admonishes him for his unbridled, lascivious feelings. The father believes that one cannot call oneself a real "man" unless one manages to restrain one's carnal desires. A "man", according to the father, is one who can bring his emotions under control, no matter what gender he/she belongs to. Even if a woman qualifies by this criterion, one can call her a "man." And a real

“woman” is one who easily succumbs to his/her sexual impulses even if that person is a man. In awakening his first son from his carnal dreams and in opening up nobler horizons to him, the king decides to tell his son the story of the Pious Woman, a woman, according to the king’s formula, more “manly” than any other woman (Yousefi, 1990: 90). This story comprises 310 verses and is the longest anecdote in Attār’s mystical poems. Throughout this story Attār weaves his moral and mystical views into the narrative, reminiscent of those found in his other works such as the *Conference of the Birds*, *Mosibat Namah*, and *Asrar Namah* (Moayyed, 1998: 434). By virtue of poetic justice, Attār rewards his protagonist for her virtuous way of life. The Pious Woman remains a faithful wife to her husband despite all the difficulties and miseries in her life and is rewarded in the end.

In writing the story of the Pious Woman, Attār was most probably inspired by a story in *Al-Kāfi* by Abu Jafar Mohammad ibn Yaghoub ibn Eshāgh Koleini Rāzi. Attar’s version of the story, however, is more elaborate and embellished (Moayyed, 1998: 435-437). In Kāfi’s original story the woman does not have a name and the story takes place amongst Jewish people. In Attār’s story the woman is called *Marhoomeh* (literally meaning “the deceased woman”) and the fact that people wish she would assume the king’s throne and that she instead helps her husband to become king and appoints an Arab man as his minister and the way the story culminates in a final moral are all Attār’s additions and alterations (Moayyed, 1998: 435-437). There are many similar stories which appeared after Attār wrote this. These include *Tooti Nāmāh* by Ziyauddin Nakhshabi Badāveni which came out almost 130 years after *Ilāhi Namāh*, and *Tooti Nāmāh* (or *Javāher ol-Asmār*) by Imad ibn Mohammad al-Saghari which appeared approximately 15 years before Badāveni’s story (Al-Saghari, 2006: 2-3). Both these authors lived in India and were contemporaries. They translated the story from its Indian source *Haftād Tooti* (Seventy Parrots) or *Shukasaptati* (Al-Saghari, 2006: 18). They have both acknowledged the Indian source of their stories and have said that they took the liberty to select and add to the original version. But the story

of the Pious Woman does not appear in *Haftād Tooti* and none of these Indian authors have acknowledged Attār or Koleini for this story.

One can also find different versions of this story in *Nazhatol Majālis va Montakhabol Nafāes* (1479) by Abdol Rahmān ibn Abolsalām Safouri. One can also find a different version of the story of the Pious Woman in *One Thousand and One Nights* in which the story appears to be very close to Koleini's version (the actual manuscript of *One Thousand and One Nights* did not contain the story of the Pious Woman. It was added by European translators such as the French translator Antoine Galland). There is also a Turkish adaptation which appeared between 1481-1512 in which the setting happens to be Turkistan. In modern Persian literature, Mohammad-Taqi Bahār (1886-1951) has written a poem which reflects the same story (Bahār, 1957, vol. 2: 361).

The Tales of Staunch Chastity

The Pious Woman

As mentioned before, Attār's story of the Pious Woman differs, sometimes slightly and sometimes drastically, from all the other mentioned stories. In this story, the king tells his son about a devout woman called Marhoomeh. Marhoomeh's husband happens to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca and he resigns his wife to his older brother's care. The man's brother falls madly in love with Marhoomeh and tries to seduce her. Having failed in his attempts, and fearing that she might tell her husband about his lecherous advances once his brother returns home, he bribes four people into giving false witness and accusing the woman of adultery. The judge orders the woman to be stoned to death. They take her to the desert and stone her and leave her to bleed to death. The next morning, as Marhoomeh is crying in pain, a travelling Arab hears her cries and finds her and takes her to his place on his camel. He nurses the woman until she finally recovers. The Arab, seeing Marhoomeh's beauty is infatuated with her and plans to marry her. As soon as he realizes that she is married, he changes his mind

and instead, adopts her as his stepsister. The Arab man has a vicious and wicked servant who wishes to seduce Marhoomah. Thwarted in his attempts to seduce her, one night he kills one of the Arab's children in his cot and hides his bloody dagger under Marhoomah's pillow. The next morning when they find the murdered child, Marhoomah manages to convince the Arab that she is innocent and has no idea as to what happened that night. The good-natured Arab gives Marhoomah some money and sends her away. Marhoomah arrives at a village and finds that the villagers are taking a young man to be hanged on the gallows for failing to pay his taxes. Marhoomah pays off the man's debt, using all the money she was given by the Arab and sets him free. The ungrateful young man whose life Marhoomah had saved, follows her and wants to fornicate with her. Marhoomah refuses to sleep with him and he, to take revenge on Marhoomah, sells her to a merchant. The merchant takes Marhoomah with him on board a ship and attempts to rape her. The passengers on board the ship manage to save her life but, later on, they themselves fall in love with her and wish to sleep with her. The only hope for Marhoomah is to pray to God to save her from these wolfish men. She asks God to take her life and deliver her from these wicked people. God eventually answers Marhoomah's prayer and wrecks havoc on the ship. The wrecked ship is drifted towards the shore. Marhoomah disguises herself as a man and asks to be taken to the king's presence. She tells the king the story of what happened to the ship, but she hides her true identity from him. She gives the king all the treasures and the goods and, in return, asks him to build a temple for her so she could devote her life to prayer in that place. The king grants her wish. She so devotes herself to praying that the whole city is enchanted by her virtues. Upon his death, the king advises his men to appoint Marhoomah as their future ruler. Marhoomah refuses to accept the offer on the grounds that she needs to choose a spouse first before becoming king. She summons 100 girls who come to her with their mothers, pretending that she wants to choose one as a spouse. In fact, she tells them all her story and reveals her identity. She is then asked

by the elders of the city to choose a king for them. Meanwhile, Marhoomeh's fame was known throughout the kingdom. Sick and disabled people would go to her for healing. Marhoomeh's husband returns from his pilgrimage. His brother tells him the fabricated fib about Marhoomeh and what happened to her after her husband departed. The man takes his brother, who is now disabled, to the Pious Woman to be cured. On his way to see the Pious Woman, he comes across the Arab whose wicked servant is now blind and disabled. They decide to accompany the man on his journey. On their way they also happen to see the young man whose life Marhoomeh had saved. Being blind and handicapped, his mother begs the men to take her son with them to the Pious Woman so he also joins the men in search of a cure for his disability. Upon setting eyes on the company of men, Marhoomeh recognizes her husband, but she puts a veil on her head and hides her face under the veil. She says to the men that to be healed they each have to confess their sins. Only then can she pray for their recovery. The sinners confess their sins. Marhoomeh prays for them, and they are all cured and regain their health. Then, Marhoomeh unveils herself and her husband praises God for this reunion. Marhoomeh then forgives the sinners and helps her husband to become king and the Arab to be his minister and she devotes her entire life to prayer (Yousefi, 1990: 89).

Between the Lines

The king's story of the Pious Woman appears as an allegorical story for the abandonment of worldly and materialistic values and attaining nobler virtues in life which ultimately lead us to the divine virtues. As Attār maintains, "We are busy with the luxury of things / Their number and multiple faces bring / To us confusion ..." (Attār, "Invocation"). This means we have to abandon these luxuries and give up the material world in order to be able to see the divine in ourselves and become one with Him. In the dialogue between the king and the first son who

longs for the fairy princess Attār expresses his belief that the fairy princess may be one's own pure thoughts and emotions.

Although the Pious Woman is noted for her exceptional beauty, it is her piety that eventually saves her life. The ordeals she suffers in life are a test of her character, a character that appears to be strong and emerges triumphant in the end. The downfall and ultimate misery of lecherous men and the injustice of the law and the judge pave the way for the ultimate theme of the story which is related to unification with the Divine. In attaining this goal, as Attār believes, one does not need to be a man; instead, one should cultivate a good and virtuous heart and stand firm against carnal desires. This is the mark of a true person, no matter what his or her gender is.

In effect the Pious Woman emerges as a superhuman. She suffers great hardships and remains faithful to her husband and becomes the shining sea that swallows up all the filths around her and makes them disappear (Yousefi, 1990: 13). The three men who cannot control their lascivious feelings debase themselves to the lowest degree. Attār, as in another story in this collection called "Rabe'eh and Bektāsh" praises the woman's strong character and pious soul, reminding one of the Islamic traditions in which piety is made equal with martyrdom.

The Odyssey

The Greek epic poet, Homer (900-800? B.C.), also wrote a story (*The Odyssey*), which, in some aspects, resembles the story of the Pious Woman. The *Odyssey* tells the story of Odysseus's wanderings after the battle of Troy, which marks the beginning of Western literature and is based on folk ballads and other oral stories of the time. In *The Odyssey* Homer shows his hero, Odysseus, who is unwilling to leave home to go to war against the Trojans. He has to leave behind his extremely beautiful wife, Penelope and his new born son, Telemachus. Odysseus is Homer's mythic hero who is intelligent, courageous and valiant. Most people remember *The Odyssey* for the heroic deeds achieved by its protagonist, Odysseus, and also for his cunning ruse.

As in many other ancient Greek stories, our hero suffers from what is known to be “hubris” or excessive pride. This proves to be his weakness which arouses the anger of the gods who delay his trip back home and make his travel home very hazardous and difficult. Odysseus also suffers from another weakness. He enjoys the company of women. He stays with Circe and Calypso for many years before he is reminded of going back home. Odysseus is a character who is constantly tempted by fame, women, and glory and has to go through many trials and tribulations before he arrives home. But one thing which keeps bothering him all throughout these years is whether his wife is still faithful to him.

Even though Odysseus dominates Homer’s story, one cannot overlook the importance of another seminal character in the story who makes his epic poem memorable. Odysseus and Penelope are happily married until Odysseus reluctantly decides to join the Greeks in the Trojan War. It is here in the story that Penelope’s patience and love are tested. Many noble men (one hundred and eight) come to woo Penelope in her husband’s absence. They come to marry Penelope with an eye to her husband’s throne. They assume Odysseus is dead. The risk grows with every passing day that Penelope might give up hope. Penelope’s suitors get more and more aggressive as time passes and they gradually find their way to Penelope’s palace and take control of the affairs. They feast on the royal palace and abuse their hostess’s hospitality. They even harass her to choose one of them as her new husband. Day after day Penelope cunningly weaves a shroud for her father-in-law, trying to give her suitors the impression that she is striving to finish it before she chooses a husband, but every night, she unpicks her work and buys time for herself and her husband. Penelope gives the “persistent nobles reason to be hopeful.” She sends out messages and “makes promises.” Her “regular epithet” in Homer is very intelligent (Marquardt, 1985: 32). She makes fool of her suitors for many years and leads them on (Marquardt, 1985: 32). She weeps for her husband but does not lose control of the situation and manages to successfully put her suitors off for many years. She also single-

handedly manages their estate and looks after the house. After Odysseus returns from his long journey, which lasts twenty years, he finds that Penelope is still faithfully waiting for him. Odysseus eliminates all his wife's suitors and they both live a happy life together.

In order to understand the suitors' relationship to the whole story, one must refer to Aristotle's observation that "at the close of the epic, the good and the wicked receive their just deserts" (Allen, 1939: 104). Later in the story, Penelope marries Telegonus after her husband is accidentally killed. Telegonus makes Penelope immortal. In western literature Penelope emerges as a paragon of virtue, intelligence and faithfulness. Many writers have written poems and stories in praise of her loyalty and piety and many artists have created artworks about this queen of virtue.

Conclusion

In many aspects, the Pious Woman reminds one of Penelope in Homer's poems who is also celebrated for her faithfulness to her husband and for her patience and feminine virtues. Attār's Pious Woman, like Penelope, faces the amorous and lecherous advances of many greedy suitors, but remains as a figure of fidelity and manages to keep her suitors at bay. But, unlike the Pious Woman who appears as a mystic heroine, Penelope is a mythical woman. As a mythical heroine, Penelope is larger than life. She is also a figure of authority. She is, to use Aristotle's words in the second paragraph of *Poetics*, "superior" to us in degree. It is Penelope who determines when she will be able to choose a new husband. In the final episode when her husband is disguising himself as a beggar, she sets the rules that whoever could shoot an arrow from Odysseus's bow will be her new husband. She seems to be in total control of her destiny despite all the pressures on her. Penelope is a cunning and clever manipulator. She unravels the loom each night to buy time for herself and her spouse. She devises tricks to delay her numerous suitors and stands firm

against them who try to intimidate her into accepting one of them as her husband. She even tests her husband in the end to see if she could use the bow. She prevents Odysseus's kingdom from falling into the hands of his rivals.

The Pious Woman, on the other hand, is a mystical character. She is unbelievably devout. She is a simple-minded and good-natured woman who escapes from danger by dint of her piety and virtues. The Pious Woman does not have a Telemachus to constantly remind her of her husband. Penelope's husband has many affairs with other women before he arrives home. Penelope remains faithful to him even though he has not been loyal to her. There is no such double standard of morality in the story of the Pious Woman. There is not indication whatsoever that her husband is not true to her. Her husband is, in fact, on a pilgrimage, not on a woman-hunting expedition. Unlike Penelope's suitors who wish to marry her for her wealth and throne, the men who are after the Pious Woman are sexually aroused by her beauty and simply wish to seduce her for sexual gratification and have no serious intention of having a lasting relationship with her. In the end, it is the Pious Woman whose identity is hidden from her husband, whereas, in Homer's story, it is Odysseus who is disguised as a beggar. Unlike Penelope who already owns a kingdom and all the glory of it, the Pious Woman gains a kingdom by remaining true to her husband and by her virtuous acts.

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