

Comparing the Risale-i-Al-Tayr of Khaghani, Sana'i, and Najm al-Din Razi from the Perspective of Bird Symbolism

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Article Info (۱۵۱-۱۶۸)	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article	Before Attar, various poets and writers had attempted to compose works on the language of birds. The vast majority of these works were composed around the late fifth to early seventh centuries, and despite the many commonalities that the composition of this type of work requires, there are also obvious differences among them. One of these differences is in the way birds are symbolized. In this study, which was conducted using a descriptive-analytical method and library resources, the Risale-i-Tayr of Khaqani, Sanai of Ghaznavi, and Najm al-Din Razi are compared from the perspective of bird symbolism because differences were observed in their presentation, final goal, and descriptions that made them susceptible to being compared in the present study. In this study, it was found that how the difference in the perspective and purpose of writing these works ultimately led to differences in the symbolism of birds. The Risale-i-Tayr of Khaqani includes unique descriptions and leads to the praise of the Prophet (PBUH). Sanai, with the focus on monotheism, depicts the scene of bird worship, and Najm al-Din Razi wrote a eulogy of the minister of the time through the language of birds, meaning that the style of each poet also had a special importance in the uniqueness of his language of birds, which has been reviewed in this study.
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Introduction

The period between the fifth and early seventh centuries AH constitutes a distinctive era in Persian literary history, marked by the proliferation of works composed “in the language of the birds” under such titles as *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, *Risāla al-Ṭayr*, and *Lisān al-Ṭayr*. Although the tradition predates this era—most famously in Avicenna’s *Risāla Ṭayr*—the overwhelming majority of such texts were produced during these two centuries. Despite their shared conventions, these works display striking differences, particularly in their modes of bird symbolism (*namādpardāzi*). The fame of ‘Aṭṭār’s *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr* has overshadowed its contemporaries, leaving the bird-language works of Khaghani Shirvani (d. 595 AH), Sanai Ghaznavi—the watershed figure who divided Persian poetry into before and after himself—and Najm al-Din Razi (d. 654 AH) comparatively neglected. These three authors differ demonstrably in thought, style, and worldview; the present study therefore asks: what are the differentiating features of bird symbolism in their respective bird-treatises?

Method

This research employs a descriptive-analytical method based on library sources, close textual reading (*matn-khāni*), and note-taking (*fish-bardāri*). The corpus comprises Khaghani’s 66-verse *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, Sanai’s 46-verse *Manṭiq al-Ṭayr*, and Najm al-Din Razi’s *Risāla al-Ṭayr*. The analysis first situates the works within the literary and intellectual climate of the fifth-to-seventh centuries—an age of Seljuk dominance, religious sectarianism, and the flourishing of Sufi poetry—then examines each work’s narrative structure, symbolic economy, and ultimate purpose, before comparing them. Earlier scholarship (Sohrabi Shahrabak; Salmanpour; Farzanehfard & Dastmard; Zare Jirehdeh; Balani; Sheikhhosseini & Ja’farzadeh) has compared various pairs among ‘Aṭṭār, Avicenna, Ghazali, Sanai, and Khaghani, but none has compared the bird-language of these three authors together through the lens of symbolism—a gap this study fills.

Results

The comparison reveals three fundamentally distinct modes of symbolism, each shaped by the author’s purpose:

1. Khaghani: Symbolism in the service of description and panegyric of the Prophet. Khaghani's *qaṣida*, with two prologues, opens with descriptions of spring and the Ka'ba, then stages a debate among birds (cuckoo, nightingale, dove, blackbird, partridge, parrot, hoopoe) over which element of springtime nature is most beautiful. Unable to agree, they appeal to the Simorgh—whose unexpected verdict privileges the red rose, grounded in the Prophetic tradition *al-ward al-aḥmar minnī*. The poem culminates in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. Khaghani's bird symbolism is meticulously calibrated to each bird's established traits: the deceitful, self-interested cuckoo; the contemplative nightingale; the wild dove; the mountain-dwelling partridge; the parrot associated with hidden fragrance and divine inspirations; and the hoopoe, who discerns royal thrones, as courtier. His ~30% foundational-inspired reliance on Qur'an and ḥadith undergirds the whole edifice.

2. Najm al-Din Razi: Symbolism unveiled for worldly reward. Razi's prose treatise is the most structurally idiosyncratic: it is ultimately a panegyric (*madīḥa*). A parrot complains to the narrator; the narrator's "heart-bird" obtains a decree from Solomon appointing the 'Anqā of the Maghrib—none other than the contemporary vizier Jamal al-Din Sharaf Sulghuri—as protector of the birds. Uniquely among authors of this genre, Razi explicitly decodes his own symbols at the end (parrot = voice of the suffering; hoopoe = his own mind; black crow = night and stars; one-eyed falcon = day and sun; the 'Anqā = the vizier). This self-exegesis, prompted by his aim of obtaining patronage, and his relative weakness in symbolizing the crow and falcon (relying solely on color), distinguish his approach sharply from the hermetic traditions of his peers.

3. Sanai: Symbolism in the service of divine praise. Sanai narrates no plot; instead, he depicts a moment of collective bird worship, with each bird's prayer tailored to its nature and even its name: the crane's "lakāl-ḥamd" pun; the ermine-white winter plumage of the dove; the peacock's vanity before the hoopoe's crown; the mu'adhdhin-like shrike; the partridge swallowing stones; the hunting the mu'adhdhin-like shrike; the partridge swallowing stones; the hunting God's omnipotence; and the rooster's closing admonition against heedlessness (*ghaflat*). Sanai even chose the measured *hazaj* meter to harmonize rhythm with devotional

content, reflecting his theocentric worldview in which the cosmos is the manifestation-ground of the Lord.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis demonstrates how differences in the authors' aims, incentives, beliefs, and worldviews permeate every element of their texts. Khaghani, master of description, deploys exquisite symbolic characterization to reach a eulogy of the Prophet; Sanai, the archetypal poet of Sufi monotheism, transforms a traditional tenet—the cosmic praise of God—into a novel tableau of bird-worship matched to each species' traits; and Razi, the prosifier of ascetic Sufism writing for courtly reward, discloses his own symbols rather than entrusting them to the discerning reader. Together, the three works show that bird symbolism in Persian *al-tayr* literature is not a fixed convention but a flexible instrument shaped by each author's ultimate purpose. The study recommends future research on the historical evolution of bird-language writing in Persian literature, comparative symbolism across other bird-treatises, and the sociocultural reasons for the genre's concentration in this specific period.