

ANIMAL TALES IN THE MATHNAWÎ OF MEVLÂNÂ JALÂLU'D-DÎN RÛMÎ

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In the creation of a literary work, purpose and material are the two essential components as in many other fields. We would like to take a closer look at how these two components are displayed in the monumental work Mathnawî of the great Islamic poet and mystic Mevlânâ.

We know that Mevlânâ's purpose for writing in verse is not to poetize or to meet his need to do so. On the contrary, he poetized to capture his disciples' attentions and to make them happy. He had said that in his old country and among his people, there would be nothing more shameful than being a poet and if he had stayed there, he would have had spent his time by lecturing, writing books and preaching in conformity with the custom of these people.¹ Mevlânâ's purpose, on the other hand, is to insinuate the good and the higher feelings to men by showing the good and the right and to direct them towards these, or, in other words, to try to save them from animality and help them reach humanity. In the Mathnawî, Mevlânâ achieves this aim by the use of stories that have the quality of being easily remembered and with these stories he makes use of plentiful and varied material which consist of verses from the Quran, sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, stories on prophets, tales of the famous people who lived before him, such as Attâr and Sanâi. However, animal tales and motives make up a very important part of his material and this is what we would like to emphasize here

Scanning through the Mathnawî, one sees that Mevlânâ has used fifty-one small and big animals in order to explain and demonstrate his thoughts. These animals vary from the flea to the camel, from the

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¹ Mevlânâ, *Fihî Mâfih*, trans. by Meliha Ülker Tarıkâhya, İstanbul, Maarif Matbaası, 1958, p. XIII.

mosquito to the elephant, but although they play an important role in Mevlânâ's creativity, they do not all appear in the same degree of frequency and importance. Some of them are seen only in one motive or story while the others occupy more space. The question is why Mevlânâ has given so much room to so many animals and why he preferred to express his thoughts by the intermediacy of animals.

The human beings become interested in animals from the first stages of their lives. Animals are the source of occupation for a baby after the first few months when he starts to form relations with its environment. Among the first words that a child uses are "meow, meow", "wrack, wrack", imitating animals. Animal tales and the zoos are the great sources of entertainment for children. The desire to have animals is widespread not only among children but also among the adults. Mevlânâ, who knew "man" well with his good and bad sides, was aware of this close relationship between him and animals. Through his use of animal tales and motives, Mevlânâ aimed to address everyone with their different attitudes, feelings, education, culture, customs and habits and convey what he believed to be right. As a capable teacher he believed that animal tales would have more insinuating power. It is also a fact that Mevlânâ himself liked animals very much and this should have also played a role in his giving so much place to animals in his work.

In the world literature the expression of ideas through fables is a literary genre. Although Greek Aesop of the sixth century B.C. is commonly known as the first creator of fables, historical research has shown that many of the fables belonged to a period much earlier than him. Originating in great many parts of the world, due to the cruelty of the rulers who would not let certain ideas be freely expressed, these fables were assumed to be by Aesop.²

Mevlânâ has told us the animal tales of his Mathnawî by making use of the fables written before him. Among these we can cite "Kelile and Dimne" of the Indian literature which according to E. G. Browne is one of the immortal monuments of the oriental mind.³ It has had the privilege of being translated into different languages and was

² Süleyman Adıyaman, *Ezop'dan Masallar*, Ankara, Kültür Matbaası, Preface.

³ Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. 2, Cambridge, University Press, 1928, p. 350.

actually the name of a moral magazine composed for the rulers. The "Mantıḡ al-Ṭayr" of Persian Literature, the heroes of which are birds and which explains the "Union of Existence" in the Moslem mysticism, is another.

In the Mathnawî the lion, the donkey, the camel, the dog, and the birds are used more frequently owing to the fact that their natures suit better the ideas Mevlânâ wishes to convey. There is a total of thirty tales about these animals in the different volumes of the Mathnawî. There are a total of sixty animal tales together with the horse, bear, fish, deer, jackal, rat, elephant, ant, mule, cat, ram, frog, wolf, ox, cow, calf, fly, mosquito, rabbit, snake, and the dragon tales which he uses less. Moreover, there are many motives about these animals scattered in the six volumes of Mathnawî.

The qualities of the art and literary style which Mevlânâ demonstrates in these tales and motives can be summarized as follows:

1. Depending on the idea he wanted to insinuate, he has chosen the most suitable animal in terms of its physical structure and characteristics.

2. His stories are not one dimensional. That is, his aim is not only to give mystical and moral lessons or to philosophize. He has handled mystical, religious, philosophical, moral, and educational topics jointly, and emphasizing them persistently, has chosen to explain and teach his ideas in the shortest and clearest way with his unadorned language, fluent style and art.

3. He does not have a set form for the animals he uses in his tales and motives. That is, an animal is not absolutely the representative of a certain thing or a certain type. He uses the same animals to explain different ideas but gives them qualities proper to the topic at hand. Sometimes, while making completely opposite comparisons using the same qualities, at other times gives them different personalities and turns them into new characters. Although this has created a contrast in almost all of his stories and motives, Mevlânâ has not found this as important and has chosen the way to create the strongest effect. For example, the lion which he likens to God with his quality of influence and power; has also been likened to passion, the source of all evil due to the same qualities. He has qualified the cock, the messenger of the holy time also as lascivious. The fox becomes the representative of a dishonest disciple,

dishonest man, soul, and devil with its slyness while he is also a loyal disciple who serves the *Ḳutb*, the highest member of the hierarchy of *sūfi* orders. He has likened the donkey both to a faithful Moslem and to a person who enjoys the worldly pleasures. The fish is both a saint-prophet (the people whom Mevlânâ thought of as the fish of the holy sea) and a selfish person.

4. While using the animals only as examples to convey his ideas, he also touches on the still used proverbs and customs. These examples can be said to have folkloric value.

5. Despite his wide imagination and variety of examples, he has not avoided repetitions. But his repetitions are reminders, increasing his power of influence.

6. In his tales and motives, from time to time, he uses psychological analyses and demonstrates how people lower themselves for personal advantages. The people he has described, the situations he has analysed are even today very much alive. This is a proof of the fact that the topics Mevlânâ used will never get old.

7. In the tales and more frequently in the motives, the animals are elements of resemblance. The resemblances he draws are lovely, original and full of life. For example, he has likened the restless flight of bees from one place to another to different thoughts and dreams of awakened people which disturb them and make them restless:

چون شوی بیدار باز آید زیاب
فکر زنبورست و آن خواب تو آب⁴
میکشد این سو و آن سومیرد
چند زنبور خیالی در پرد

“Thought is bee, and your dream is water; even if you sleep when you wake up the bees will rush to your head.”

“So many dream bees fly about, pulling you from one side to another.”

He has also likened the truth, which is very hard to reach, and the dream, which people run after foolishly, to the bird which flies in the air, and its shade on the ground.

⁴ Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mathnawî of Jalâlu'd dîn Rûmî*, vol. 5, London, E. J. W. Gibb New Memorial Series, 1933, p. 48, couplet 731-32.

میدود بر خاک پران مرغ وش
میدود چندانک بی سایه شود
بیخبر کی اصل آن سایه کجاست

مرغ بر بالا پران و سایه اش⁵
ابلهی صیاد آن سایه شود
بی خبر کان عکس آن مرغ هوست

“The bird flies in the air, and its shade seems to be flying on the ground”.

“A fool runs to catch the shade until he has no strength left.”

“He is not aware of that, that shade is the image of the bird flying in the air and does not know where its original is.”

8. He has complete knowledge of the nature, life style, character and ways of pleasure of the animals he uses to demonstrate his ideas. Their relations with the people, nature and among themselves are completely based on reality.

9. The conclusions which can be drawn from his tales and the motives are not fixed. The conclusions he comes up with show his knowledge of the sciences of his time, but every individual with a different cultural background can draw his own conclusions.

For example, from the motive Mevlânâ has said to tell that a disciple needs a master:

هرک او بی سر بجنبید دم بود⁶
جنبشش چون جنبش کژدم بود

“One that moves without a head will be a tail, and his movement will be like that of a scorpion”

one can deduce the result that a person who acts without consulting experienced people will be unsuccessful.

Again in Mevlânâ's motives in which he pointed the difference between saints-prophets and other people:

هر دو گون زنبور خوردند از محل⁷
هر دو گون آهو گیا خوردند و آب
لیک شد زان نیش و زین دگر غسل
زین یکی سرگین شدوز امشک ناب

“Both kinds of bee ate from the same place, but from this came out poison, and from that came out honey”

“Both kinds of gazelle ate grass and drank water, from one came out dirt and from the other came out pure musk”

⁵ Same work, vol. 1, 1925, p. 27, c. 417-19.

⁶ Same work, vol. 4, p. 362, c. 1430.

⁷ Same work, vol. 1, p. 18, c. 268-69.

there is the idea that people have different talents, and that one should not expect the same results from everybody's work.

In these tales, which also have the quality of being enjoyable when read simply as stories without searching for a purpose, Mevlânâ has also touched upon scientific and social topics. As such, Mevlânâ confronts us both as a teacher and as a novelist.

10. His animals are the interpreters of his thoughts. In the story of "The parrot and the merchant going to India" he expresses this clearly:

ترجان فکرت واسرار من

⁸ طوطی من مرغ زیر کسار من

"My parrot, my witty bird, the translator of my thoughts and secrets".

11. Finally, it can be said that one can comprehend Mevlânâ's views and thoughts on several topics through the animal images in his tales that even his animal tales and motives can be enough to understand him.

⁸ Same work, vol. 1, p. 105, c. 1715.