The Role of Allegory (Tamsil) in the stories of Mathnavi Ma'navi

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Abstract

Tamsil (allegory), which has been mostly **inspired by religion and myth**, forms a great part of the mystical verses of Persian classical literature. Tamsil (allegory) is mainly defined in literature as an anecdote used for explaining and interpreting mystical and moral beliefs. Besides, Tamsil is considered as a sample of didactic and imaginary literature. Molana's language and expression is more of symbolic allegory (Tamsil e Ramzi), a kind of allegory presenting a character, a thought, an event or a happening in the tangible world on the one hand, and explaining a topic beyond this appearance on the other hand. Such allegorical stories are both pleasurable and influential. Furthermore, they help to simplify the concepts and ideas which are a little complicated to the lay mind. As Shafiei Kadkani puts it, Tamsil can be used to refer to what western rhetoric calls **allegory**, and it is mainly used in the field of narrative literature.

Tamsil (allegory) is divided into two main categories, namely, **political (historical) allegory** and **the allegory of ideas**. In the former, the characters and the actions of the surface level represent the characters or the political and historical events of the underlying level. As an Example one can refer to **"Absalom and Achitophel"**, written by **"Dryden"**, whose topic is the political crisis of the then England. In the latter type, that is, the allegory of ideas, the characters are like mental concepts, as an example, Milton's Paradise Lost in which there is a clash between Satan and his daughter, sin, can be mentioned.

In Persian and Arabic rhetorical discussions, Tamsil (allegory) is similar to **simile** and **metaphor** and does not go beyond one or some sentences. But in Persian belles-lettres, **the term "Tamsil"** has been usually along with anecdotes and stories. In this sense, Tamsil has the same meaning as what Aristotle has mentioned in his book **"Rhetoric"** and also the same as what we here call "**fictional allegory**", since "**the vehicle**" in Mathnavi Ma'navi is compound and is of allegorical and anecdotal nature and "the tenor" is a logical and compound fact which needs a compound and tangible vehicle in order to be expressed and proved. Fictional allegory is used for typifying a particular class of the society, with special way of thinking and activities. As the majority of the readers are the masses, poets translate the symbols. The interpretation of an allegory is sometimes mentioned in the title of Mowlana's stories and by interpreting an allegory, Mowlana expresses causality, as we can see in the story of Sheikh Ahmad Khizrawiya:

Only when the sweet (Halva) seller boy weeps a lot

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Will the oceans of God's mercy be brought to the melting pot

Tamsil (allegory) is a combination of different factors and elements which are formed by the narrative. This narrative is an image of a thought, of a situation, of a message, or of an abstract concept which is formed within the framework of the activities and characters of human beings, animals, plants or even inanimate beings. Although Mowlavi has used a wide variety of literary devices, with which westerners dealt hundreds of years after him, the diversity of methods, the characterization in the stories of Mathnavi Ma'navi, and also the categorization of such allegorical stories have not been paid much attention in past. Apart from fable, parable, and exemplum which are considered as western types, Mowlavi has used some other methods including report manifestation[***], anthropological allegories, and paradoxical elements to create more allegorical stories.

The main characters in some of the allegorical stories are human beings, as in the story of the Old Harper, the Arab Dervish (Sufi) and his wife, the man who was tattooed, the man who knocked at the door of a friend, the Grammarian and the Sailor, the deaf man and his sick neighbor, the Arab filling a bag with sand, and the like. As an example, in the story of "the Chinese and the Roman Artists", Mowlana puts the Chinese and the Romans against each other and he thinks that the knowledge of the people of sense who are busy with disputation is not certain compared with the knowledge of the people of heart who rely on the purification of the inner self.

The basis of such allegories is sometimes an event in which the human beings and the animals together are the main characters, as in the story of the oilman and his parrot, the Hoopoe and Solomon, the Merchant and his parrot, the man who stole a snake from a snake-catcher, the villager who stroke a lion in darkness as he conceived it as his cow, and the like.

There are 53 allegorical stories in Mathnavi, in which the main characters are animals which think like human beings and act according to their natural features, representing a particular class of human societies. In such stories a spiritual parallel takes us from the appearance of the sentence to the allegorical meaning beneath and a moral point is also presented, as in the story of the lion and the beasts, the story of the mosquito and the story of the lion which hunted with the wolf and the fox, and the like.

Another kind of allegory is **exemplum** which is a very famous story whose tenor and its underlying meaning as well as its moral will be realized by the listener as soon as he or she hears the whole or a part of it, like the story of "the bear's service" which is mentioned about foolish kindness or the story of "the fox and the tail fat" which shows temptation and greediness or the story of "the peacock's feather and the peacock's wing or the deer in an ass stable", or the Falcon and the Owls, and the like.

Parable is a short narrative which closely resembles a moral, religious or mystical principle; hence, it is expressed by prophets, mystics and great men. Compared with fable, parable is more exalted. In the story of "Moses and the Shepherd", Moses is law-bringing and also has a divine mission and the shepherd's communion with God, which is criticized by fanatics, is the exemplar of intimates and it is based on simile.

Paradox forms a remarkable part of Mowlavi's allegorical stories. It is one of devices Molana used for foregrounding utterances and also for expressing mental concepts

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[***] In this method the poet reports the meaning of a Koranic verse either by interpreting or translating. Generally speaking, the word 'manifestation' refers to the manifestation of holy Koran in Mathnavi Ma'navi.

indirectly. In the story of the far-sighted blind, the blind man sees the faults of others from a distance (but, he is blind to his own faults), the sharp hearing deaf is the symbol of yearning and greediness and the long-robed naked man is one of the deluded of this transitory world. In this anecdote, the poet has explained very briefly the story of the people of Saba who gave no thanks to God for his blessings and rebelled.

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