

**An Intertextual Study of the Notion of “Simorgh” in  
*The Conference of the Birds* by Jean-Claude Carrière**

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*The Conference of the Birds* of Jean-Claude Carrière is one of the great theater plays inspired by *Mantiq-ut-Tair* of Attar in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Mantiq-ut-Tair* is one of the famous works of Attar, the Persian Sufi poet of 12<sup>th</sup> century, which symbolizes the quest of truth and Perfection through the story of thirty birds travelling together, who cross seven valleys of love and confront a lot of difficulties in order to achieve their goal, which is finding the real Perfection and eternal prosperity. In this mystical text, whose name is literally inspired from one of the Surah of the holy Coran, Simorgh (Phoenix), the king of the birds and who is also a mythical bird in Persian literature, is the symbol of Perfection, being the aim of the travel of these

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interested birds. In fact, Attar attributes a divine character to Simorgh by estimating it as a symbol of God, who is the origin of the genesis of the world and toward whom all the creatures return definitely. Therefore, it can be understood why Attar symbolically narrated his story by insisting on the need of searching the Perfection for all the enthusiastic seekers of the absolute Love.

Carrière, the French contemporary playwright, who was directly influenced by this eminent mystical and poetic work, tried to maintain the principal form of Attar's text and, considering the diverse constraints of theater, made some changes in the source text like the omission of unessential anecdotes and modifying the place of some of them or inspiring particular ones from other works of Attar like *Tazkirat-ol-Owlia* or *Elahi nameh* to accelerate the rhythm of the play, changing the narrator to the first person, adding some new dialogues and altering the poems to the dialogues, choosing certain birds who have distinctive characters and selecting special parts of the story which have cosmopolitan messages that could be understood by everyone all over the world. One of the main important changes is the transformation of Simorgh's notion. In fact, relying on the criteria of his worldview, which tend to be like a quasi-mysticism terrestrial, he supposed another meaning for Simorgh, being in contrast with Attar's celestial mysticism. In other words, although the character of Simorgh exists in both works, Carrière, mentioning the symbolic travel of the birds, presented another dimension of the Perfection, which is different from its initial manifestations in mystical doctrine of the East. Besides, the notions of multiplicity and unity which are the basic mystical concepts of Attar, especially in this work, and show the symbolic transformation of thirty bird into one, have a distinct signification in the theater of Carrière and represent the philanthropy and the necessity of becoming a better human being.

According to Carrière, Simorgh is the symbol of self-awareness which can lead us to be unified with the unity of the world. Therefore, in *The Conference of the Birds*, it can obviously be seen that the signs of the presence of Simorgh are somehow dissimilar to the original text, and this is due to the special view point of its writer. Although in this play, Simorgh is the goal of bird's travel, it does not accompany them during their journey and can only be seen in the first and the last scene. In fact, this absence symbolically means that Carrière focused mostly on the personal attempts of the birds and declared that they did not need a leader for all the steps of this special travel that happened profoundly inside of their soul.

In this essay, attempts were made to verify the notion of Simorgh profiting from the analytical theories of Genette in intertextuality, insisting on the effective and intervening presence of one text in the other. According to this theory and the categorization of textual transcendence, the intertextuality is one of the essential characteristics of each text, leading to the production of new ones. Consequently, the comprehension of recent texts depends on having a global idea about the previous ones. Hence, *Mantiq-ut-Tair* of Attar is the hypertexte of Carrière's play and is considered an excellent source of inspiration for the French playwright. So, its traces can certainly be seen in the genesis of this contemporary literary work.

One of the principal elements in the text of Carrière is that although he benefited from Attar's mystical poem, he transformed its message according to his occidental and terrestrial (materialistic) mentality, being the product of the perplexity of contemporary human for finding the meaning of life. That is why the aim of the bird's travel can be interpreted in another way: consciousness and being aware of one's ignorance are the only solutions that can help people to consolidate their relation with the soul of the world and being unified with it, which is significantly dissimilar to the divine perception of Attar. In fact, the Iranian poet encouraged the *saliks* to do their best to achieve the real Perfection.

However, Carrière's brilliant adaptation of *Mantiq-ut-Tair* shows that in this modern time, the human being searches, always and perhaps more than ever, the answer to his epistemological questions in a superior power and that is why the mystical doctrine of the East, specially known by its famous poets like Attar, draws attention of the occidental intellectuals for reproduction, recreation and adaptation of such successful works. *Mantiq-ut-Teir* of Attar was thus a great source of inspiration for different kinds of adaptations all over the world, especially in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Finally, considering the thrust of this research, attempts were made to answer the questions of how the mystical character of Simorgh was presented, from an intertextual viewpoint, and by which it how most of the deviation from its primary manifestations is supported, and how *The Conference of the Birds*, a foreign contemporary text, succeeded in transferring the universal message of Attar in a different area of form, meaning and performance.

**Keywords:** *The Conference of the Birds*, *Mantiq-ut-Teir*, Simorgh, Intertextuality, Attar, Comparative Literature.