Against the Current:

Farid al-Din 'Attar's Diverse Voices

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Abstract

Love and its transformative power have long been at the center of
Islamic Sufism. For Sufi writers profane love, perceived as the
love of worldly beloved, was the first step on the path toward the
union with the divine. Farid al-Din 'Attar (1145-1221) was one of
the most significant authors to espouse and articulate profane love
as a representation of both earthly and heavenly love. 'Attar's use
of the theme of transgressive love and his inclusion of
marginalized members of society such as social pariahs and
transgressors as earthly manifestations of the divine is
particularly noteworthy. The present article traces the
intersections of transgression, law, inclusion and exclusion, self
and Other in 'Attar's treatment of class, gender, sexuality, and
religion. In creating an understanding of human diversity and
'Attar's inclusiveness, this article refers to the concepts of law and
justice in its modern sense as well as acknowledging the medieval
understanding of these notions. In pursuing this argument, a few
theoretical notions concerning transgression and law are used.
Although applying modern theories to medieval society might
appear anachronistic, it is essential to inquire whether modern
insights and theories can help us to better understand medieval
works, or whether they are exclusive to early modern and modern
scholarship. Without such an analysis, we are left with an
inadequate understanding of medieval culture and literature. This
article fills this gap by exploring the reasons for 'Attar's inclusion
of transgressors and peripheral characters in his works from a
modern theoretical perspective.

Keywords: Farid al-Din 'Attar, Love, Self & Other, Transgression

In *Tales of Love*, Julia Kristeva writes, "Love is the time and space in which 'I' assumes the right to be extraordinary. Sovereign yet not individual. Divisible, lost, annihilated; but also, and through imaginary fusion with the loved one, equal to the infinite space of super-human psychism. Paranoid? I am, in love, at the zenith of subjectivity" (5). According to Kristeva, the power of love allows individuals to be extraordinary, to merge with the imaginary, and to reach the zenith of subjectivity. Love empowers individuals to transgress social, moral, ethical, class, gender and sexual boundaries, to de- and reconstruct identities through annihilation of the self

Love and its transformative power have long been at the centre of Islamic Sufism. Love, in Sufism, leads to a reconstruction of the self, initiating a (re)discovery of, and union with, the divine beloved. Sufi writers admitted two different kinds of love: that of God and that of the things that God loves. For Sufi thinkers, such as Ahmad al-Ghazzali (1061-1123), 'Ayn al-Ghuzat al-Hamadhani (967-1007), Farid al-Din 'Attar (1145/6-1221) and Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273), profane love, perceived as the love of worldly beloved, was the first step on the path toward the union with the divine. Earthly love, therefore, was believed to be the emanation of sacred love. In their eyes, the love of every created object elevated to the love of God and Beatific Vision.

Plato was the first author to assert that the experience of beholding a beautiful human being (*ephebe*) can instigate a vision of the divine's absolute beauty; and of course, Neo-Platonists followed Plato. The notion of God taking human appearance is also common in Christian teachings, such as the doctrine of incarnation of Christ as the Logos. In addition, revering the images of Christ, Virgin Mary and the saints, and prostrating before them has been common in Christian tradition since the fifth-century onwards. Even the concentration on crucified Jesus, on the saints, their sufferings and their asceticism functions as an earthly medium employed by believers to experience the heavenly (Ritter 449).

In this amalgamation of the heavenly and the earthly, humans experience the sacred as it presents itself in a wholly different form, in the form of the earthly. They are confronted by a mysterious act, a reality that does not belong to their world, but is in the ordinary objects of their world and is an integral part of their profane world. The ordinary profane objects become sacred–that is something else, the divine Other–yet they continue to remain themselves and

participate in their surrounding cosmic milieu as well. This is similar to the sacrament of Holy Communion where the Host is an ordinary object – a food or bread – that becomes sacred; and the church is the sacred space that allows this to happen, and shields it from the profane world outside. Therefore, for the spirituals, the entire natural world has the ability to reveal itself as "cosmic sacrality" (Eliade 11-2).

A discourse bearing similar features evolved in the medieval Persian Sufi literature, focusing on earthly love as a doorway to spiritual love. The term *'ishgh* (profane, excessive love) and its derivatives were frequently used in classical Persian prose and poetry. Beginning in the mid-eighth and during the ninth-century, some of the more determined Sufis Such as Mansur al-Hallaj, used the term to express the relationship between the Creator and His creatures (Dehghani 117). Sufis proceeded to contemplate Divine beauty and love as manifested in human form. This human form or being was called *Shahid*, that is, an eyewitness or a testimony. The beauty of God-created earthly human was contemplated as a testimony to divine magnificence and presence. Hence, the earthly was perceived as a key to the heavenly.

'Attar was one of the most significant authors to espouse and articulate the term *'ishgh* as a representation of both earthly and heavenly love. 'Attar's works, which embody elements of this Sufi discourse, were widely read and imitated by the later Sufis, such as Rumi. Shedding new light on the Sufi teachings, the writings of 'Attar stand out not only due to his unique understanding of love in Sufism, but also because of the way his works illuminate the path of love through the art of storytelling. None of 'Attar's predecessors came near to his straightforward and lucid storytelling technique. Although his narratives are mostly symbolic and allegorical, they can be easily understood even by a layperson because of the familiar subjects and characters he tends to employ. Those familiar with the Sufi principles can learn the lessons of morality and humanity that 'Attar strives to convey in his stories. Those not familiar with the Sufi thought may just enjoy the simple subjects and familiar characters of these stories (Bayat 49).

'Attar believed that even in the physical world, love is the main element on the path leading to union with the divine. According to 'Attar, a true wayfarer (*salik*) should seek love on the divine path and annihilate his ego through love in order to find God and reach divine union. By seeking earthly

love, the Sufi is led on the heavenly path toward union with the divine. Oftentimes, the Sufi's profane love, representing the heavenly, guides him/her to transgress the earthly boundaries and to reject the status quo. This is the moment when the Sufi faces the Kristevan zenith of subjectivity; that is the Sufi wayfarer de- and reconstructs her/his self, emerging as a new subject able to cross earthly boundaries with the means of divine love. However, despite her/his transgression of these boundaries, this new subject is an individual totally submitting to the will of God.

'Attar's use of the theme of transgressive love and his inclusion of the marginalized members of the society such as social pariahs and transgressors is particularly noteworthy. In the wake of contemporary intolerance of minorities and modern discourses around human diversity and inclusiveness, medievalists tend to think of racial, sexual, religious, social and other minorities during Middle Ages as well; and ponder whether minorities were tolerated and fully integrated in their societies.

Although in its modern sense of the word otherness attracts exclusion, 'Attar shows his response to an increasing number of different voices in his works by embracing and loving all. This article argues that by being inclusive of all people in his works, 'Attar challenges social conventions and ideologies and tries not to repeat the established social scripts. Looking at 'Attar's works such as *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* (Biography of the Saints), *Ilahi-namah* (Book of God), *Musibat-namah* (Book of Suffering), and *Mantigh al-Tayr* (Conference of the Birds), we notice a preference for including marginalized members of society such as women, homosexuals, religious and social transgressors. He oftentimes moves beyond this by including stories in which infidels, sinners, fools, and members of despised professions appear as standard models for the believers.

'Attar expresses the association of human identity with the perception of the (societal) Other in positive ways writing about a burglar who breaks into someone's house at midnight, finds himself hungry, eats a loaf of bread, but is unable to follow through his plan of burglary, because he realizes the owner's kindness (*Musibat-nama*, XXXIV: 2). 'Attar refers to the owner as the Creator in this story who provides for all and admires the burglar's appreciation and acknowledgement of that kindness.

In another story, 'Attar tells about a corrupt man who has died and people are carrying his coffin to the cemetery. To avoid praying for the corrupt man, an ascetic distances himself from the crowd. However, in his dream that night, the ascetic sees the corrupt man in paradise. He asks him how a sinner, like him, has attained that exalted status. The corrupt man tells him that because the ascetic did not exercise compassion on him, the Creator did. Then the man speaks of God's wisdom with the ascetic and explains how He chides his creatures in order to extend kindness to them when necessary (*Mantiq al-Tayr*, Lines 1877-1902).

'Attar's affirmative approach towards the Other appears yet again in the story of a gambler. 'Attar uses a libertine gambler as a true model for Sufism. He warns Sufis against their worldly concerns and advises them to be prepared for all kinds of trials and losses. But, to do so, he embraces an outcast gambler. The story relates that a gambler was being carried on the shoulders of libertines when the Shaykh of Mihna sees him. The Shaykh asks, "To what dost thou owe this rank thou holdest today?" to which the gambler replies, "I owe it to having lost my all" (*Ilahi-nama*, Discourse XVIII: 10).

ازو پرسید شیخ عالم افروز

که «از چه یافتی این میری امروز؟»

جوابش داد رند نانمازی

که «من، این یافتم از پاک بازی»

The Shaykh cries out and announces that since the gambler has lost all, he is exalted over the world. 'Attar comments that sincerity on the divine path requires a willingness to lose all at once.

'Attar allows members of marginalized groups teach lessons of sincerity and piety to the followers of the faith by referring to God's acceptance of all. In doing so, 'Attar attempts to integrate the so-called socio-cultural outcasts regardless of the dominant discourses regulating deviations. Hence, I argue that like his characters, 'Attar can be viewed as an outcast through his performative acts of non-conformity. In this way, he offers possibilities for alternative performances, subjectivities, and identities.

Here however, we might ask: what do the terms the terms transgression, subversiveness, and inclusiveness, which pervade this project and have been frequently associated with post-structuralism mean to 'Attar? Since notions of

equality, justice, and inclusiveness differed significantly in medieval Muslim societies from what we know of them today, let us have a brief look at medieval notions of justice and equality in the Middle East.

In the medieval Middle East, the concept of "justice" referred to a ruler appointed with divine blessing and providence to protect the state from internal and external enemies; this required strong military force and wealth. Justice was secured by the king at the top of the society as dependent on the peasants at the bottom to provide revenue and receive justice in return. Therefore, in the context of medieval Middle East, "justice" as a concept signified more than the equality of a society's members before the law. It rather had to provide "peace, protection, good organization, and a functional infrastructure" (Darling, "Medieval Egyptian," 1).[2] This ideology has been called the "Circle of Justice," out of which a literary genre of advice to kings and other royalty emerged as an influential expression of values held by kings and the population in the Islamic world.[3]

Since divine blessing was of paramount significance and justice referred to the relationship between individual citizens, the Divine, and the ruler, we might observe 'Attar's tendencies to be socio-culturally inclusive as the result of his position in Sufism and his devotion to the divinity. Hence, we can propose that 'Attar's spirituality allows him to experience a great degree of openness and tolerance of the outcasts, the peripherals, the (societal) Other. This particular vision of 'Attar takes a concrete form in his works via language and content that is inclusive and conscious of issues such as gender, sexual, religious, and socio-cultural diversity. 'Attar's works are an attempt to remove the barriers that uphold exclusion. 'Attar recognizes people's equality and interdependence at the face of their differences. In doing so, 'Attar portrays his true surrender and submission to the divine as a Sufi through his acceptance and embrace of *human diversity*. Tolerance and embrace of the *diversity* of God's creations, and not the shoring-up of socio-cultural boundaries, is 'Attar's way of loving divinity. 'Attar's love of the divinity and humanity allows him to create empowered characters who are able to transgress social, moral, ethical, class, gender, and sexual boundaries, to de- and reconstruct their identities through annihilation of the self and union with the (both the societal and the divine) Other.

Before moving to the analysis of 'Attar's works, we shall have a look at the modern theoretical notions on transgression and inclusiveness. In creating an understanding of human diversity and 'Attar's inclusiveness, I would like to refer to the concept of law and justice in its modern sense as well. This is important because I would like to see whether modern theories of transgression, justice, law, inclusiveness are applicable merely to the modern times or they can shed light on our understanding of the past. In this study, I am interested in creating a deeper understanding of the inequities of the notion of Circle of Justice and how Attar's view was a challenge to the social hierarchy of the Circle of Justice. In pursuing this argument, a few basic theoretical notions concerning transgression and law offered by George Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan can help us.[4]

In *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, Georges Bataille defines transgression as an urge to transcend the limit while trying to maintain it simultaneously. Transgression is always associated with imposition of an existing limit. It prevails along with our understanding of the taboo and our ability to reconcile between the respect for, and violation of, law; eventually, these violations result in the individual's awareness of law. Bataille claims that observing and submitting to the taboo is an unconscious process. However, violation of the taboo is accompanied by an internalized, individual anguish of mind, thus maintaining the taboo's existence. This internal process situated within a social setting leads to both transgressing and maintaining the prohibition. Within this system, transgression can never amount to the abolition of the law, specifically because it does not liberate the individual from all of their socially and historically constructed limits.

In addition to Bataille's notion of transgression, 'Attar's work can benefit from the use of Foucault's notion of transgression. Although Foucault's work examines the centrality of sexuality in a secular and post-modern world and replaces transgression and the limit with the sacred and the profane, his argument in "Preface to Transgression" illustrates that transgression is an important concept for understanding liminal experiences, which shape social and cultural boundaries. For Foucault, the boundaries of the self and the Other are illuminated through acts of transgression. Therefore, transgression is the continual crossing of boundaries, through a process of construction and deconstruction of identities, and through the separation of the self and the

Other. Stallybrass and White provide a useful exposition of Foucault's concept in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, arguing that the Other is frequently rejected and excluded at the social level. Since the self and the Other are interdependent, and since the Other is both socially despised and desired, the self/Other dyad is an integral part of the dominant culture's social imaginary. Thus, the Other is simultaneously in the periphery and center of the society. This contradictory fusion is what helps the self to reconstruct its subjectivity in its relation to the Other.

Similarly, Foucault argues that "the limit and transgression depend on each other" ("Preface," 29-52). For Foucault, "Transgression is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside" ("Preface," 35); transgression is not a sign of liberation; it is not associated with the ethics; "it must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive" ("Preface," 35). Therefore, the relation between transgression and the law is an obscure one. Foucault's ideas indicate that the relationship between transgression and law is not an absolute one.

We can track this obscurity in Jacques Lacan's conceptualization of transgression in its relation to the law through exploring his idea of "jouissance."Jacques Lacan argues that despite the dominance of the law, we enjoy it; and we do so, particularly because it prevails. This is how Lacan explains "jouissance."[5] For Lacan, jouissance is neither the instinctual urge for pleasure, nor the fulfillment of such urges, which both function in conflict with the law. Jouissance is not organized through transgression of the law. On the contrary, it is organized in relation to the law. Lacan claims, "If there is no god … everything is forbidden" (cited in Zizek 9-10). Nonetheless, the absence of the law prescribes the universalization of prohibition because the enjoyment that we experience from transgression is in fact imposed. Our enjoyment always follows a certain law, the law of the Superego. Therefore, the relation between transgression and the law is not a simple opposition of rebellion and prohibition. To employ Foucault and Lacan, we can espouse that the relation between transgression and the law is not a relation of overcoming repression, or liberation from constraints, but of undoing the structures that produced these binaries. For these post-structuralists, therefore, the law is not a limiting force but one that allows alternatives and possibilities.

Following the same line of argument about transgression, and in the meantime acknowledging the differences between medieval and modern notions of transgression, law, and inclusiveness, my analysis disrupts the prescribed and established structures that have produced binaries of not only transgression and the law, but also of the profane and sacred, erotic and esoteric, the earthly and heavenly, self and the Other, and exclusion and inclusion. To me, transgression as a force undermining the law and violating the established norms necessitates tolerance, encourages openness, and produces possibilities for construction of various subjectivities and inclusiveness.

Here, however, the question might arise as to why I am interested in applying modern theoretical understandings of transgression and inclusiveness on a period of time in history – namely the Middle Ages – which is very far from our modern world. After all, is it not anachronism? Applying modern theories to medieval society – which produced its own perspectives on life, religion, society, and culture – might appear anachronistic; however, it is not new. Previous scholarship has already investigated similar works. Michael Sells and James Webb have discussed the affinities between Lacananian "Real" and mystical language. Ian Almond's comparative study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi was such a work as well. Mahdi Touraj's analysis of Rumi's bawdy tales using Lacanian psychoanalysis is another such work. When faced with a similar question, Foucault replied, "I set out from a problem expressed in current terms today, and I try to work out it**s** genealogy. Genealogy means that I begin my analysis from a question posed in the present" ("The Canon," 255-67). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault again expresses the reason for his interest in obsolete systems and periods as, "Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing a history of the present" (31). Thus, what I am suggesting in this article through employing modern theory on medieval literary works is that medieval literature and writings like 'Attar's are part of the genealogy and explorations of medieval inter-subjectivity of outstanding descriptive value, which are also significant for our understanding of modern subjectivities.

Regarding this intertwinement of medieval and modern notions, in her book, *Sacrifice Your Love,* Aranye Fradenburg, referring to Freud, writes, "We

are creatures not only of our time, but also of our highly particular histories – our families, their families, the other families they know, and our phantasmic transformations of them into memories, ideals, expectations, disappointments, responsibilities, and utopian desires" (48). It is true that anachronism assumes established and definitive temporality where all events occur in their proper time order. It is also true that anachronism has been considered a flaw of a specific culture that lacks historical consciousness or a transgression because of that culture's lack of acknowledgement of the past. However, as Fradenburg argues,

'Becoming medieval' does not require complete identification with the past; for one thing, that is impossible, and for another thing, even if we could do it, we would not be 'becoming.' Sometimes we should approach medieval texts with critical languages that differ from those their authors, even their audiences, might have approved. We cannot confine the work of knowing the Middle Ages to replicating, however hopelessly and/or heroically, medieval cultures' self-understanding. We also should explore how medieval cultures, like all others, may have misunderstood themselves. (*Sacrifice Your Love*, 77-8)

Therefore, the medieval period cannot be limited to the past; it rather has a major role in shaping our present as medieval scholars; and our present, along with its modern perceptions, is equally significant in perceiving the medieval period as it was and as it could have been. Hence, this interplay between stories of different periods has the potential to embody the relation between history, theory and literature.

By examining modern theories and applying them on medieval literature, I venture to see whether modern insights about justice and inclusiveness can help us to better understand 'Attar's works, or whether these ideas are exclusive to early modern and modern relations. My purpose here is not to construct a new truth, but rather to dismantle the narratives, concepts, ideas, and truths that constitute our present experience and (mis)perceptions. Literature (and generally art), whether medieval or modern, reflects upon the real image, as Plato introduced – mirroring our own world, familiar yet foreign. It produces a copy of what already exists in real world even though that copy might be imaginary. However, it produces an image of the real that competes with the idea of the real, for, as Lacan puts it, "The picture does not compete with the

appearance; it competes with what Plato designates beyond appearance, as the Idea" (Lacan, *The Four*, 112).

It is at this moment that the distinction between the symbolic and imaginary aspects of literature comes into play. It is the distinction between literature and truth, between our world and the exotic, the far away, the past within our interactions with literature that encourage us to question what is beyond the socio-cultural imaginary, the truth. It allows us to look behind the veil, as Lacan would argue.

Hence, if looking at medieval literature (and specifically, 'Attar's Sufi poetry) from the perspective of modern theory is a transgression, then let my writing transgress the system of orders, which organize our (mis)perceptions of our present. Let my text be an attempt to move behind the veils to introduce new possibilities and encourage tolerance for transgression and inclusion of the Other. As it might have been with 'Attar, let my narrative be an act of therapeutic self-definition and subjectivity.

Having outlined my theoretical purpose, I will now turn back to the writing of 'Attar. We shall now look at the ways in which 'Attar engages the underrepresented members of the society, the transgressors, and the social pariahs in his works through re-writing the established scripts, illustrating his love of both divinity and humanity.

'Attar's works explore divine love with its peculiar characteristics through earthly love and love of God's creation. Worldly love stories are presented in various types and among diverse individuals in 'Attar's works. Choosing women as spiritual figures in his works, such as the first female Sufi Rabi'a al-A'dawiyya (717-801), 'Attar fulfills a significant condition for his success as a male Sufi poet who is accepting of the female gender. Rabi'a lived most of her life at a time when misogynist attitudes, licensing polygamy, concubinage, and easy divorce for men were allowed in the Middle East. Female abuse was legally and religiously sanctioned; androcentric teachings within Islam dominated customs pertinent to relations between men and women (Ahmed).[6] Regardless of the gender boundaries of the day limiting female autonomy, 'Attar shows how Rabi'a transgresses the dominant gender norms through her constant refusals to marry, her public criticism of men, and her witticism. In one exceptional narrative in *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, 'Attar relates the story of a group of people questioning Rabi'a's spirituality by telling her that men are

superior to women in spiritual matters because all prophets have been men. Agreeing with them, Rabi'a responds, "But egoism, egotism, self-worship, and *I am your highest Lord* have not welled up in any woman. And no woman has ever been a pederast" (trans. Losensky 109).[7] Rabi'a's witty response and her public criticism of men not only emphasize her spiritual equality with men, but also highlight her crossing of gender boundaries, as women were to be obedient and inferior to men. 'Attar includes stories about Rabi'a or other women as spiritual paragons while the ideal of Sufism at the time was male. Medieval male Sufis who were not favorable of women, such as Sana'i, claimed that "daughters are better on the bier than alive" during certain historical periods (cited in Schimmel 426). Hence, by including women such as Rabi'a, 'Attar transgresses the religious and socio-cultural standards of his day, the result of which is an emergent world of unlimited possibilities.

To portray his tolerance of sexual diversity, 'Attar presents us with narratives about dervishes and Sufis who fall in love with young adolescent boys conforming to the philosophy of gazing at male beauty (نظربازی یا شاهدبازی) where Sufis contemplate divine beauty in adolescent boys. The followers of this philosophy believed in the incarnation of the Divine in human beings. They called this human being a *shahid* which means a witness to divine beauty through the beauty of an adolescent boy of 13 to 20, and the practice was called *shahidbazi* which refers to the act of falling in love with a beautiful adolescent boy, which is also synonymous with *liwat* (sodomy).

Ideally, the practice was expected to be confined to spirituality, without any physical attraction or sexual encounter. Sufi love of adolescent youths was not meant to be consummated sexually; it was expected to be a spiritual love. It was also supposed to be discreet and not in the public eye and not reciprocated easily and publicly by the beloved. Some orthodox religious theologians and some strict Sufis warned the society against the dangers of gazing at the beauty of the adolescent boys because they considered the gaze preliminary to getting involved in sexual encounters and thus one of the major sins in Islam; *liwat* (sodomy) – which is a transgression against *haqq Allah* (a right of God) (El-Rouayheb 118). Another reason for the condemnation of the philosophy of gazing at beauty and considering it transgressive was the disruption of gender roles. Like many other cultures, Islamic culture had developed gender roles for

the opposite sexes where women were to be timid and passive while men were expected to be aggressive and active. These features demarcated male and female sphere boundaries, crossing of which would mean transgression. Since gazing at the beauty of adolescent boys could have led to sexual consummation, one partner would have been active and the other passive. The passive partner would have therefore crossed the gender boundaries by allowing himself to be emasculated and feminized (El-Rouayheb 25). Although the practice was subject to rejections and condemnations, it remained in the Sufi circles and was acceptable if the partners conformed to the standards of the philosophy.[8] In 'Attar's works, however, we encounter same-sex relationships which are not between Sufi masters and disciples, and do not conform to the rules of the philosophy of gazing at adolescent beauty.

A series of such narratives, which focus on the love affair between Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (971-1030) and his slave, Malik Ayaz, deviate from the principles of this Sufi philosophy. Because the relationship does not occur in confraternity circles, nor in mystical initiations, it transgresses boundaries of the Sufi rhetoric of gazing at adolescent beauty. This relationship is portrayed by 'Attar as sexually charged, reciprocated by the subject of affection, indiscreet, in the public eye, and unusual in that the beloved is an adult man rather than an adolescent boy (Shamisa). 'Attar portrays this intimate affair in a narrative in *Ilahi-nama*, whereupon hearing that Ayaz has gone to the bath alone, Mahmud rushes there with a swollen heart, sees that "from the reflection of [Ayaz's] face the walls with the door and the roof were all set a-dancing", loses his senses, and falls into rapture (Discourse XI: 6). The setting of the story in the bath and the imagery of the walls all in flames is written very sensually; the flame metaphor refers to the fire of passion that this beauty has set in the Sultan's heart. In this narrative, the lover wants to behold the beloved in his entirety, rather than just an arm or a leg (Ritter 481). Gazing upon the lover's face has ignited the Sultan's heart, but the Sultan is not content; he wants his beloved entirely.

Furthermore, there are sexual overtones within 'Attar's language. Referring to Ayaz, 'Attar writes, "He beheld the face of that peri-like one which had set the walls of the bath in flames" (Discourse XI: 6).

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وزو دیوار گرمابه در آتش

Of particular importance to the Sultan's passion is the term 'peri,' which refers to a beautiful female supernatural fairy in Persian mythology. The word used in the Persian text is *Parivash*, a feminine name given to females. This might be a comment on Ayaz's feminine role in the relationship. At the end of the poem, 'Attar comments, "Gaze upon him and enjoy a whole world of pleasure, for such thou enjoys in him every instant," (Discourse XI: 6) which is a reference to the philosophy of gazing at male beauty and its pleasures.

تماشا می کن و می خور جهانی

که تو خوردی جهانی هر زمانی

Ayaz reciprocates the Sultan's desire, which contradicts with the ideal of the philosophy where the beloved is supposed to stay passive and subordinate.

In this love affair, however, it is not clear who the lover and who the beloved is, who the passive and who the active partner is. It seems that there is no sense of conformity to the standard rules. Not only are the gender boundaries crossed, but also the dominant/master-subordinate/slave relationship is reversed. As Hellmut Ritter writes, in Mahmud and Ayaz's narratives, "it is from the beloved slave that love's rules are to be learned and these are chiefly presented through the refined answers and instructions which [Ayaz] gives to his royal lover" (384). However, through this reversal of the roles, 'Attar does not intend to abolish the rules of the philosophy and liberate his lovers from all historically set limits. Rather, he attempts to undo the established narratives, encourage openness, and introduce alternatives by crossing socially constructed boundaries. By writing a love story between men, 'Attar provides an instance of mutual desire instead of one-sided objectified desire, as in the philosophy. In this way, 'Attar to some extent produces homosexuality in his texts. In addition, his construction of the master/slave, dominant/subservient power relationship as mobile, and his blurring of the lines of passive/active partners seem to be a critique of class and gender.

Narratives about sexually diverse humans are predominant in 'Attar's works. We frequently read stories about catamites (*mukhanas*) who prove to be loyal to the divine at times of trial and are portrayed as models for the believers (*Ilahi-nama*, Discourse II: 2; *Musibat-nama*, Discourse XIV: 2). We also read about esteemed Shaykhs who appear in houses of transvestites, among unchaste

groups, and admire them (*Mantiq al-Tayr*, Lines 1922-1937). By including these narratives, 'Attar seems to be suggesting that in a spiritual context, these demarcations lose meaning. 'Attar also implies that the true love of God, and being a Sufi, is in itself transgressive; after all, it involves renouncing earthly, normal relations such as marriage and procreation, much the way a same-sex relationship does. He shows that the true love of the divine requires the love of all His creations regardless of the differences.

'Attar's works are representative of a rare medieval openness, a standpoint and an attitude that encourage dialogue towards the Other. Religious transgressors who are attested to their "abandoning of the faith for the sake of love" are another group of outcasts in 'Attar's works (Ritter 400). 'Attar's openness towards their abandoning of their faith is depicted in *Mantiq al-Tayr*, in the story of Shaykh San'an who after fifty years of asceticism falls in love with a Christian girl, abandons Islam, converts to Christianity, wears *zunnar*, herds her swine, worships an idol, burns the Qur'an, and drinks wine upon the girl's demand (Lines 108-145).[9]

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عشق دختر کرد غارت جان او

کفر ریخت از زلف بر ایمان او

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Love for the girl ravaged his soul;
Infidelity from those locks poured to melt his faith.

<div dir="rtl">

شیخ ایمان داد و ترسایی خرید

عافیت بفروخت رسوایی خرید

</div>

The Shaikh surrendered the Faith and bought Christianity:
Sold blessedness, purchased shame.

<div dir="rtl">

عشق بر جان و دل او چیر گشت

تا ز دل نومید وز جان سیر گشت

</div>

Passion the conqueror of his heart and soul became,
So that of heart hopeless and of soul sickened he became.

<div dir="rtl">

گفت «چون دین رفت چه جای دل است

عشق ترسازاده کاری مشکل است.»

</div>

He cried, "Faith gone, what use the heart?
Passion for a Christian-born is a hard business."

The Shaykh violates several religious laws of Islam in this narrative. Overwhelmed with the Christian girl's love and intoxicated with wine, the Shaykh loses all self-control and his intellect and agrees to all that the beloved demands. In fact, exhilarated and elevated, he experiences a mystical rapture. The Shaykh's subversiveness is a reminder of Foucault's argument about transgression of the 'limit', which "opens violently onto the limitless, finds itself suddenly carried away by the content it had rejected and fulfilled by this alien plentitude which invades it to the core of its being" ("Preface," 60). The Shaykh who had never experienced love and had conformed to formalistic Islam, by crossing the limit faces the alien content that he had previously rejected and is carried away to the core of his being. 'Attar depicts the Christian girl (*Tarsa*-bachchah) and her conditions as the temptations and hurdles that the Shaykh must undergo to perceive heavenly love and divine beauty. He illustrates the way that these demands and hardships open up possibilities for the Shaykh.[10] By encountering the Other and her love, Shaykh San'an de- and reconstructs his identity and emerges as a new subject. Although he transgresses formalistic Islam (his old self), he emerges as a true mystic of love. The Shaykh's crossing of religious boundaries is an act of apostasy and transgression of Islamic law, but it is at the same time surrender to the will of God. The shaykh's transgression of the religious laws and his process of making and unmaking of his being, and his final submission to the divine are representatives of Kristevan zenith of subjectivity

'Attar is forgiving of transgressors who break away from conventions for the sake of love. He embraces Shaykh San'an's subversive conduct because it brings the self and the Other together through cross-religious interaction and transforms the formalistic religious Shaykh into a true mystic of love. Shaykh San'an is representative of an exceptional phenomenon in the same moment that he is connected to reality. While he is like everyone else in this world, he is different and foreign too. He is ordinary enough, in Fradenburg's words, not to be cut from the real altogether, but he offers a transgressive and mystifying energy too (Fradenburg, "Sovereign Love," 69). By transgressing, the Shaykh appears as the familiar and the unfamiliar, the social pariah who is at the centre too.

'Attar shows that a true lover's only desire is to please the beloved, regardless of any worldly considerations. In this way, the Shaykh's divine also

seems to be Fradenburg's ordinary, but foreign sovereign.[11] This divine can be loved as flesh as long as He is inaccessible and foreign; and the love is derived from the jouissance of the taboo and the distance. Therefore, sovereign love creates the "subject's experience of loss" and allows the subject to be connected to the sovereign in order to reshape desire. Additionally, it is this "mutuality of lack and fulfillment," in Fradenburg's words, "that characterizes sovereign love [and] allows the subject to feel simultaneously at one with and free of power and thus assists the experiential transformation" from romantic coercion towards the reciprocal act of love via free will (Fradenburg, "Sovereign Love," 71). This sovereign love allows the Shaykh's being to be made and unmade; his subjectivity deconstructed and reshaped.

Yet while we may cherish 'Attar's work for teaching via transgression, we must also charge ourselves with cultivating a deeper understanding of how these works must be read today. 'Attar's performativity of identities recalls Judith Butler's argument that social reality is created through language, gestures, and symbolic social signs. Butler suggests that through speech acts we enact the conventions and ideologies of the world around us; in performing these conventions, by enacting them we make them seem natural, real (122). Butler contends that there is an entire history beyond the subject that enacts these social conventions, and what this subject does or performs is what was being performed long before the subject even existed. Thus, these constructed norms are being repeated like a script that "survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again" (Butler 122). This repetition is required for the hegemonic social standards to maintain power and upholding the status quo. Butler believes that even the most personal of our acts are being scripted by this hegemony and its attendant social ideologies. She emphasizes the construction of these scripts as crucial in order to be able to fight for the rights of the unrepresented, for those identities who do not conform to the hegemony. Since these social ideologies are historical and should be rehearsed repeatedly by the subjects' enactments, Butler believes that they can equally be challenged through alternative enactments and performances.

In his works, we see that 'Attar challenges social conventions and ideologies although conventions have deep roots in history. He tries not to repeat the social scripts of sexual attraction and social status present in the act

of gazing at male beauty, or scripts of obedience and agreement between men of high status and women, by conforming to social hegemony. 'Attar speaks for the underrepresented group of people, for the oppressed. To use Butler, 'Attar does his body differently from his predecessors and contemporaries by inviting the Other in. He does not conform to the ideological hegemony of the society and in doing so he becomes queer himself.

Nonetheless, while 'Attar called into question the issues of justice and inclusiveness within one nation in medieval period, we still witness exclusion of minorities today. Centuries after 'Attar advocated inclusiveness in his poetry, scholars such as Foucault and Lacan encouraged us to embrace diversity through transgression of artificially constructed boundaries; others like Edward Said casted doubt on the assumptions that shape the basics of our thinking and the binaries of the self and the other. These scholars invited us to realize the worldly set boundaries, which are based on our perception of the concepts of the self and the Other.' Of course, we should not try to erase the differences, but to acknowledge and accept them.

In order to implement this, we need to be aware of systematic marginalization, structured silences, and imposed invisibilities. By excluding and demeaning those who are different from us, we only trample the rights of great numbers of the population. Today, we should not forget 'Attar's, and other scholar's, invitation to the acceptance of the coexistence of diverse voices alongside each other regardless of whether they are contesting or cohering. These are voices, which deserve attention. And as we witness in 'Attar's works, literature can fulfill the demand of giving attention to the marginalized members of the society by awakening in readers a sense of openness to alternative possibilities and diverse human forms. Literature has the potential to defamiliarize the familiar. It is the site for asking questions and taking action, the site for giving birth to new modes of thinking.

Notes:

1. See also Linda T. Darling, "Do Justice, Do Justice, For That is Paradise" Middle Eastern Advice for Indian Muslim Rulers." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 22.1and 2 (2002): 3-19, and Linda T. Darling, "Circle of Justice." *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Three, Brill Online, 2012. Reference. University of California, UC Santa Barbara CDL, 27 July 2012

http://refernceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-islam-3/circle-of-justice-COM_24405

2. This genre is also called Mirror for Princes and one such literary work is Kai Ka'us Ibn Iskandar's *Qabus-nama* in which he advises his son on matters of kingly etiquettes and values.

3. The reason I give examples from post-structuralists alone, while discussing justice, which is the most important Enlightenment concept (liberals, social democrats, Marxists) is that the term transgression is more often associated with post-structuralists and my focus in this paper is more on transgression than mere justice.

4. Lacan considers the Pleasure Principle as the means to limit jouissance. According to this definition, giving up jouissance becomes necessary for the attainment of subjectivity since jouissance is forbidden f or the speaking subject and the jouissance which has been sacrificed becomes the object which is desired, but unattainable. However, in this way, jouissance becomes pain because there is only a certain amount of pleasure that can be attained if the subject transgresses the prohibition and after that there is only pain left and jouissance becomes the consequent suffering.

5. See also, Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron, eds., *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1991); and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxiety of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2005).

6. *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, ed. Nicholson, 70.

"این همه هست ولکن منی و خودپرستی و انا ربکم الاعلی از گریبان هیچ زن بر نیامده است و هیچ زن هرگز مخنث نبوده است."

7. The Persian word مخنث (*mukhanas*) which has been translated as pederast in this passage refers to a young boy or old man who is the passive object of a same-sex relationship. It can also be translated as a "catamite."

8. For more information on the philosophy of gazing at male beauty see 'Abd al- Husayn Zarrinkub, *Ruzigaran,* 2nd vol. (Tehran: Sukhan Publications, 1375/1997); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2006), and Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2009). For information on condemnation of the philosophy see Muhammad al-Ghazzali, *Risala fi tahqiq ru'ya t Allah fi'l-manam wa-ru'ya t al-nabi,* in *Kitab al-Madnun bih 'alā ghayri ahlih in: Majmu'at Rasa'il* (Litho. Mecca, no year); Abu Ali Sina, *Risala fi'l 'ishq*, trans. Zia al-Din Dorri, 2nd edition (Central Library, 1360/1981); Abu al-Qasim Qushayri, *al-Risala fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf* (Cairo, 1330/1951); 'Ali b. 'Uthman Al-Jullabi Al-Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (Leyden, London, 1911, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series 17); Abu al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzi, *Talbis Iblis* (Cairo, 1345/1926), 293. See Abu al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzi, *The Devil's Delusion*, trans. D. S. Margoliouth (*Islamic Culture* 12/1938/108-18, 235-40, 352-64, 447-58).

9. Burning the Qur'an and converting to Christianity are considered rejections of Islam. Worshipping idols in any monotheistic religion such as Islam is blasphemous. *Zunnar* is a cloth like a sash or a belt. The unbelievers (mostly Christians and Zarathustrians) who paid tribute had to wear this belt in the Islamic regions to be differentiated from Muslims. Of course, the *zunnar* in this story cannot be the same belt because the

Christian girl is in Rome and not in an Islamic region. But, the belt can nonetheless be considered as an indicator of non-Muslimness. Drinking wine and eating swine meat are taboos in Islam.

10. The Christian child or *Tarsa*-bachchah is the same *sāqī*-cupbearer, the *shāhid*-ephebe, and the *zunnār*-belt. The symbolic Christian child emanates light. The Christian child serves as both singer and wine-server; nonetheless, s/he is also the one who reveals and destroys the pretentiousness of the ascetics, the Sufis, the mosque-goers, the *fuqahā*, and all those on the path of religion. S/he transforms everyone's world; converting some to believers, others to infidels. This Christian child is the figure who helps the infidel gain salvation from the base soul. S/he awakens the worshipper from the sleep of negligence and purifies his soul. Through the Christian child, the worshipper discovers his own ultimate identity and reality.

11. In her book *City, Marriage, Tournament: Arts of Rule in Late Medieval Scotland*, Fradenburg refers to Royal kings as ordinary but foreign sovereign because in the mean time that the kings are frequently seen as heroes by people and are foreign to the layman, they are ordinary human beings like everyone else. This is reminder of medieval Middle Eastern notions of justice and law too.

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