



# A Comparative Study of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* & Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*

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## Abstract

Two major works of literature, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, display a number of strikingly similarities, in addition to a number of prominent differences. This paper tries to shed light on similarities and differences between these two works; therefore, the story direction, narrative techniques, characterization techniques, and settings of both works are compared. The results shows that both authors used figurative pilgrimage or journey as the mean for self knowledge, both works are the collections of stories that all fit in a larger story and characters present their true personalities through their speeches and their clothes or appearances; Meanwhile The ideas which each author attempts to impart to his readers differ greatly from each other. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* shows the Roman Catholic influences in England society, while Attar's book is influenced by Islamic and Sufism values and principles of his period.

**Keywords:** Pilgrims, Birds, journey, Seven Valleys, Qaf Mountain, *Canterbury Tales* and *Conference of Birds*

## 1. Introduction

Comparative literature is the study of nations' literature and other cultural expressions across languages and cultural boundaries. It offers critical analysis of texts, seeking to understand how the rhetorical and aesthetic features of those texts—whether literary, visual, or theoretical act together to present a literary work. It also shows the effects that each nation's literature and culture have on others. For example, the Medieval English literature is strongly influenced by French and Latin Literary works and styles. Italian poet, Giovanni Boccaccio, had a great influence on Geoffrey Chaucer's work. In fact, Chaucer borrowed Boccaccio's work "Testide" in order to write "The Knight's Tale" in his *Canterbury Tales*. (Hubbard-Brown, 2006, p.64) Persian Literature also shows traces of influences of other nations, especially Islamic texts and Arabic literature. Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* offers examples of many of such influences. For instance, the title that Attar chooses for his work "Mantiq al Tayre" (*The Conference of the Birds*) is mentioned in the Quran (Naml/16).

But sometimes, there are similarities found in various nations' literary works resulting from men's common way of thinking, spiritual connections and resemblances rather than adaptation of a particular work or style. This article attempts to portray and analyze the similarities and differences of the two great literary works in English and Persian Literature; *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer and *The Conference of the Birds* by Attar Neishabouri. Undoubtedly, none of these authors ever met or read each other's works but after close reading of both texts, one can find striking similarities in their writing style, mood, characterization and perspectives.

Since these works compositions, critics have continued to find new aspects from their complex ground and started new arguments about the texts and their interpretations. Constance Woo and William Mathews (1970), discussed the concept of journey in *The Canterbury Tales* in an article entitled "*The Spiritual Purpose of the Canterbury Tales*"; According to them Journey is an important motif in a wide range of medieval texts. It occurs in three principal ways, which are not necessarily exclusive and which frequently overlap: as an image of the Christian journey through life, an actual, physical journey to a sacred location, and an internal, spiritual experience. Christopher James Brock's article, "*Innocence, suffering, and sensibility: The Narrative function of the pathetic in Chaucer's Tales*", (2007) reviews the narration of *The Canterbury Tales*. Dr. Hossein Khosravi (2009) in his essay entitled "symbolization in *The Conference of the Birds*" examines various symbols that Attar used in his work. And Dr. Mehdi Nikmanesh proposed three views concerning *The Conference of the Birds* narration in paper titled "*The Conference of the Birds Narrative Techniques*" (2008). Dr. Nezhat Noohi compared *The Conference of the Birds* with Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* in an article published in 2006 and Seied Mohamad Marandi (2005) compares Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* with Dante's *Divine Comedy*; But there has not been enough comparative studies regarding *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Conference of the Birds*; therefore, working on this subject can be interesting and provide us valuable information about Chaucer and Attar's writing.

## 2. Background

In order to demonstrate the similarities and differences of these two literary texts clearly, first, it is better to become familiar with the authors and their literary works. Therefore, in this section we will discuss summary of Chaucer and Attar's literary life and works, particularly *The Canterbury tales* and *The Conference of the Birds*.

### 2.1 Geoffrey Chaucer's Life and Artistic Career

The life of Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343-1400) was as fascinating as the stories he told. He is called the father of English poetry and is ranked as one of the greatest poets of the Medieval Ages. Chaucer was admired for his philosophy as well as for his poetic talents.

He was the son of a well to do wine merchant, and probably spent his boyhood in the down to earth atmosphere of London's Vintry, the wine merchandising area (M.H.Abrams, 1987, p.72). As a young teenager, he was taken into an aristocratic household. At the age of 14, he became a page in the household of Prince Lionel, one of the Edward III's sons. At that time, the page was provided free education, and that is probably why Geoffrey Chaucer's father placed his son in aristocrats household (Hubbard-Brown, 2006, p.27). He fought in Edward III's army in France and was captured, but after the king himself paid his ransom, he was released.

In 1366, when Chaucer was in his 20s, he married Philippa Roet. According to Abrams (1987) "Chaucer's wife, Philippa, was a member of the household of Edward's queen and of John of Gaunt second wife, Constance of castile, and she was doubtless of higher birth than the poet" (p.72). This helped him develop close ties with John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, and other nobilities. Chaucer reached the top of his public career when he became one of the two knights for the county of Kent in 1386.

Geoffrey Chaucer's government and political career took on added importance when he was in his 30s. Between 1372 and 1373, he went to Italy for the first time. The king had commissioned him to negotiate with the government of Genoa over the choice of an English port for commerce. It was an extraordinary trip for Chaucer. Though it is not known whether or not he met the famous Italian poets, Giovanni Boccaccio and Francis Petrarch, he was introduced for the first time to the Italian language and literature, which changed his work. When he returned to England in 1374, Chaucer was appointed Controller of Customs and Subsidy of Wools, Skins, and Hides in the port of London (Hubbard-Brown, 2006, p.58-59). The power struggle in royal court would soon lead to a decline in Chaucer's circumstances. His last years were spent using his court connections to secure protection from his creditors as he waited for royal pensions to be paid. Chaucer died in London on October 25, 1400. His tomb in Westminster Abbey became the center of Poet's Corner.

### 2.2 Geoffrey Chaucer's works

Chaucer's work reflects a different and distinctive English tradition that emerged in the Medieval Ages. As a man of the court, he used the prestigious dialect of the south and his poems seem far less alien to modern readers than those recorded in the North-West Midlands dialect (Thorne, 2006, p.113).

Chaucer established English as a major literary language at the time when much court poetry was still written in Anglo Norman or Latin, and his poetry has been loved for generations for its humanity and humor. Although inspired by Ovid's poems, and such Italian authors as Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, his works remained still entirely unique and offered his personal style and techniques.

Unfortunately, few of his poems can be precisely dated and some have not been preserved. Probably, among his earliest works was a translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, a thirteenth-century French poem that exercised a profound influence on Chaucer's work. (M.H.Abrams, 1987, p.73)

Chaucer's first major work, *The Book of the Duchess* (1369-70), depicts the author's attempt to soothe the grief of John of Gaunt, whose wife, Blanch, died in 1368. Works such as *Troilus and Criseyde* (1372-84) and *The Assembly or Parlement of Fowles* (c.1384) continue to show Chaucer's interest in courtly love, but his style becomes more decorative and the content more moral. (Thorne, 2006, p.116)

From his other works, we can mention: *The House of Fame (1374-1382)*, *The Legend of Good Women (1386)* and *The Parliament of Fowls*.

Chaucer's great literary accomplishment of the 1390s was *The Canterbury Tales*. A group of about 30 pilgrims gather at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, across the Thames from London, and agree to engage in a storytelling contest as they travel on horseback to the shrine of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury, Kent, and back. Harry Bailly, host of the Tabard, serves as the master of ceremonies for the contest. The pilgrims are introduced by vivid brief sketches in the General Prologue. Interspersed between the 24 tales told by the pilgrims are short dramatic scenes presenting lively exchanges, called links and usually involving the host and one or more of the pilgrims. Chaucer's death, in 1400, prevented him from completing the full plan for his book; the return journey from Canterbury is not included, and some of the pilgrims do not tell stories. The work is nevertheless sufficiently complete to be considered as a unified book rather than a collection of unfinished fragments. (J.E.Luebering, 2010, p.60-61)

### 2.3 Attar Neishabouri Life and Artistic Career

Mohammad-Ebn Abi Bakr Ebrahim Ben Isac, much better known by his pen-name Farid al-Din Attar, is amongst the greatest poets of Persian Literature. His dimensions as a literary genius increase with the further investigation of his writings, which are still far from completely explored.

Attar was born at some time during the twelfth century in Neishapour in north-east Iran, and died in the same city early in the thirteenth century. His name, Attar, is a form of the word from which we get the 'attar' of 'attar of roses' and it indicates a perfume seller or druggist (Davis, 1984, p.2).

Information we have about Attar's life is very little. The only information available regarding his life is that he was the son of a prosperous chemist, receiving an excellent education in Arabic studies and medicine. He helped his father in the store and when his father died he took over his business. According to some literary historians (Jami and Mashkoor (1377/1998)) the incident that changed Attar's life and caused his penitence was about a poor man (theosophist) who went to his shop one day and asked for some money but Attar was so busy that he didn't pay any attention to him, so the man asked him "How will you die master?" Attar answered: "my death will be same as your death". Man told Attar "Can you die like me?" Attar answered; "Sure", the man put his wooden bowl under his head and whispered "God", and died. After this soul wrecking incident, Attar became a different man (Mashkoor, 1998, p.24). He changed his life style and abandoned his pharmacy store and traveled widely for 39 years around the world. Attar's travels seem to have been undertaken more in the pursuit of knowledge than patronage; during his life, he never sought a king's favor or wrote anything in nobles' praise. For that reason, it seems that he was not well known as a poet in his own lifetime, except at his home town, and his greatness as a mystic, a poet, and a master of narrative was not discovered until the 15th century. "Attar was back in Neishapour at the time of his death, which is variously given as having occurred between 1193 and 1235. One of the dates most favored among early writers is 1229, the year of the Mongols' sack of Neishapour during their devastating sweep westwards, which took them to Baghdad and beyond". (Davis, 1984, p.3)

### 2.4 Attar's Works

Attar's works reflect the whole evolution of the Sufi movement. He wrote at least 45,000 rhymed couplets and many prose works. The collection of 1885 tales in his works indicates his high talent and ability. Mashkoor (1377/1998) introduces Attar works in the introduction of *The Conference of the Birds* as follow: *Elahi Name* (The Book of God), *Asrar Nameh* (Book of Secrets), *Mosibat Nameh* (Book of Tragedy), *Mokhtar Nameh* (the Book of Chosen), *Tazkeratol Olia* (the Biography of Saints), *The Collection of poems* (The Bureau) and *Mantiq at tair* (The Conference of the Birds) which is considered as Attar's greatest work.

*The Conference of the Birds*, great Sufi poem and fable is all about the importance of committing to a spiritual journey. It describes the pilgrimage of the world's birds in search of their ideal king and the arduous journey they take to reach him. Birds in this poem want to find the great Simorgh, their king, but they have been told by Hoopoe that he lives far away and the journey to him is hazardous. The poem's title relies on a clever word play between the words Simorgh which is a mysterious bird in Iranian mythology and a symbol often found in Sufi literature "simorgh" which means "thirty birds" in Persian.

It was in China, late one moonless night,  
The Simorgh first appeared to mortal sight –  
He let a feather float down through the air,  
And rumours of its fame spread everywhere; (*The conference of The Birds*, 16)

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. Structure and Story Direction

One of the ways of understanding the poet's state of mind and thinking style is to study his work's structure and frame work. Most of the cultural, social and historical issues of the nations appear in their literary works; Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is reflective of the Roman Catholic influence in England during his lifetime, while Attar's *The Conference of the Birds* is based on the doctrine propounded by the mystics of Islam. During the time that *The Canterbury Tales* was written, England was facing a great political and social change. After plague killed many people, the religious traditions and the feudal system changed radically. Therefore, the Christian Church began to fall apart

because it no longer could keep all people in line by fear of religion. The Middle class people started to question old beliefs, moral standard and the validity of religion in their lives. Questions about what is right and wrong and best and worst are discussed, evaluated, and often argued strongly in Chaucer's Tales. Therefore, we can say that *The Canterbury Tales* is somehow critique of certain aspects of the Catholic Church in England and it implicitly condemns the corrupt practices of many church officials. A somewhat similar criticism is seen in Attar's work, He also questions the right and wrong and moral standards of society in his work. Attar wrote *The Conference of the Birds* in a time when ancient way was forgotten and those who were known as pious, eremite and mystics were mostly pretending. Governors took advantage of common people's devotion to mysticism and claimed to be its defender in order to gain their support but they changed mystic's ideas and principles whenever they saw fit for their advantage. In his work Attar used an allegory of the spiritual path of Sufism with its demands, its hazards and its infinite rewards to present the true principles and concepts of mysticism that according to him were neglected.

The story in *The Canterbury tales* and *The Conference of the Birds* is presented through a journey. The concept of journey in literature always shows the mankind's explorer sense for discovering the uncertainties. Both authors came up with this candid literary device, a technique that allowed them to bring together a diverse group of characters, to present a wide spectrum of society. From the twelve century, the concept of journeying changed from exile to popular expression of the spiritual quest. In both works, Passengers are enduring difficulties of spiritual journey in order to reach ultimate knowledge, freedom and salvation; and during this time they show their flaws and strong points. Therefore, we can say that Chaucer and Attar believed in reaching salvation through communal soul which is best expressed by examining each book's characters.

So pricketh them nature in their corages  
 Then longe folk to go on pilgrimages,  
 And palmers for to seeke strange strands,  
 To ferne hallows couth in sundry lands;  
 And specially, from every shire's end  
 Of Engleland, to Canterbury they wend,  
 The holy blissful Martyr for to seek,  
 That them hath holpen\*, when that they were sick.      \*helped  
 (*The Canterbury Tales, 11-18*)

Consider carefully before you start;  
 The journey asks of you a lion's heart.  
 The road is long, the sea is deep -- one flies  
 First buffeted by joy and then by sighs;  
 If you desire this quest, give up your soul  
 And make our sovereign's court your only goal. (*The Conference of the Birds, 16*)

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's characters are the group of pilgrims consisting of both men and women who come from different occupations and social class backgrounds, from the humble Parson to the despicable Pardoner. On the contrary, Attar's characters are birds that represent different types of men, as players in the social stage. Each of these birds possesses some particular characteristics and social statuses, which are attributed to the humans who lived in Attar's time. For example, the Nightingale is a symbol of men who are interested in earthly unstable pleasures, the Parrot is a symbol of selfish people, the hawk is a symbol of courtiers and the dock is a symbol of people who claim to be pious. According to Attar, society's influences cause individuals to develop different characteristics. Based on this view, Attar selects some of the birds each of which having particular characteristics that make them different from the other.

### 3.2 Narrative techniques

"*The Canterbury Tales* and *The Conference of the Birds* are the collections of stories that all fit within one single narrative, yet each could also stand alone. This narrative strategy is referred to as a frame narrative, meaning a larger story serves as the framework within which a series of smaller tales fit. The earliest known frame stories can be traced back to ancient India sometime in the first millennium BCE, when the Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were written" (Witzel, 1987). The presence of one main story and several under plots is the first dramatic point regarding narrative techniques of *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Conference of the Birds*. The main story in both works acts as a fundamental system and basis for other stories or parts. The secondary stories in both works are presented for explanation and emphasis of the main idea.

Chaucer's Tales had thematic diversity, using the concept of pilgrimage to gather a diverse collection of people together for literary purposes was unique at its own time. Pilgrimage has most often been viewed in connection with frame story, as a means of creating an envelope for the tales to follow. The structure of stories in *The Canterbury Tales* is largely

linear, with one story following another. Chaucer starts his story with the General Prologue in order to describe characters who will tell the stories; therefore, it is clear that the structure will depend on the characters rather than a general theme or moral. Each pilgrim was supposed to tell four tales, two on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. But, Chaucer only wrote twenty-four tales, his work was left incomplete when he died on October 25, 1400.

Attar, unlike Chaucer, completed his master piece, his purpose was to establish and teach the values and beliefs of mysticism. Attar's seven valleys, Qaf Mountain, Simorgh and each one of the birds are symbols of different types of people in the society. *The Conference of the Birds* is organized around the hoopoe's answers to different birds' objections to the journey or questions about it. At the beginning the birds are identified by their species (and each species clearly indicates a human type: the nightingale is the lover, the finch is the coward, etc.); they make excuses, according to their kind, for not going on the journey. Once the journey has begun, the birds ask questions about its course, and here the analogy is much more than that of a beginner on the spiritual path asking his sheikh about the trials he is likely to encounter. Each section (except for the opening and closing pages) therefore begins with a bird questioning the hoopoe (or arguing with him) and continues with the hoopoe's answer. Each answer usually contains with two or three stories which illustrate the particular point the hoopoe is making; the stories are linked together by admonition and commentary (Davis, 1984). Attar divides his poem into forty five articles (parts) which can be presented as follow: 1- introducing eleven of thirty birds which are the most important characters of the poem, 2- Describing birds gathering and acknowledging the need to have a king, 3- Hoopoe's speech about Simorgh and the necessity of joining him, 4- birds excuses and objections to the journey and Hoopoe's reply to each one, 5- Starting the journey and seven valleys description and difficulties, 6- Reaching Qaf mountain and discovering Simorgh.

Due to their personal background and profession, both Chaucer and Attar were familiar and connected with all social classes and probably that is why they used from common peoples oral literature and folklores in their works. They also used from historical and literal samples that were familiar for most of readers in their works. For example, Almost all of the narratives in *The Canterbury Tales* can be found in earlier sources, Chaucer borrowed the existing narrative models and reshaped them into his own, telling it in the voice of one of his characters, for example, The Clerk's Tale, as the Clerk admits, was mainly borrowed from Petrarch's version. There is very little that is different between Chaucer and Petrarch's handling of the narrative. In *The Conference of the Birds*, we can also see almost the same method. For instance, Sheikh Sanan's tale was originally from "Tohfatal Molok" by Imam Mohamad Ghazzali, one of the great Iranian sophists (1058–1111), but Attar presented the story in his style of writing.

Another important narrative technique that both Attar and Chaucer used in their works was presenting the context of their stories in a way that was understandable for not only educated readers but also uneducated and common people in streets. Chaucer used the language that was suitable for cross-section of English society at the time, mainly the middle class, which included wide range of social scales. In Chaucer's time, most famous writers wrote in French or Italian but he chose English and presented characters whose English nature was self-evident. In fact he is one of the first writers who wrote in English (Hubbard-Brown, 2006, p.52). *The Canterbury Tales* opening 'When that April with his shoures soote' is the first line of the English verse that is widely known.

WHEN that Aprilis, with his showers swoot,  
The drought of March hath pierced to the root,  
And bathed every vein in such licour,  
Of which virtue engender'd is the flower; (*The Canterbury Tales*, 24)

"The sweet showers of April that pierce to the root the March dryness are a reverie, a celebration of spring renewal. This opening, a welcome to April showers and to the classical god of the West Wind, is often taken as a starting point for 'Eng. Lit.' It would be better to take Chaucer's opening line as confirming that English poetry, already seven centuries old, had successfully domesticated new European literary traditions." (Alexander, 2000, p.43)

### 3.3 Characterization Techniques

Chaucer has shown himself in his characters. He presents his thoughts and ideas regarding women, social issues and Christianity through his tales. According to Hubbard-Brown (2006) Chaucer achieved something else that had never been done before; he created characters that were boastful, nasty, foolish, and funny. He developed the art of satire, making fun of people in a literary way. He also developed a form of rhyming that worked so well that William Shakespeare, among many others, adopted it hundreds of years later. (p.5) regarding *The Canterbury Tales*' characters, Fisher (2003) states that Chaucer introduces all of the pilgrims except the Canon and the Yeoman in *The Canterbury Tales*' prologue. No one can be sure of the order of the stories, but most scholars follow the order of the Ellesmere manuscript, dating back to approximately ten years after Chaucer's death in 1400. (Quoted in Hubbard-Brown, 2006) Chaucer tried to reflect interactions in England at that time. Therefore, he created pilgrims that behave the way real people do. They were not patient, and they jumped in, interrupting each other to tell their own tales. He presented a world where a variety of people had to work toward a simple, common goal of getting somewhere. The pilgrims' clothing, physical appearance, occupation and social status are among characterization tools that Chaucer used in his work to reveal some aspects of his characters. For instance, his characters clothing styles are symbol of their personality traits. The Wife of Bath's red stockings probably symbolize her lustful nature, and her large hat represents her love of fashion and luxury. Also, we can make good assumptions about some pilgrims based only on their social status. The Miller is from low-class; the medieval stereotype of lower-class people is that they were intensely physical and earthy, but a little dim. Indeed, this is what we see in the Miller's portrait.

Characters behaviors and manners are also used as one of the tools of characterization by Chaucer. The Prioress is one of the most interesting characters in *The Canterbury Tales*. She wants to convince people that she is charitable to the poor, when she sees a mouse caught in a trap, she weeps but later Chaucer writes that she has no problem feeding her hounds flesh, so her weeping over the trapped mouse is probably, like most of her habits, a behavior that she adopts to seem like a courtly damsel.

Stories told by pilgrims are also indication of their thoughts and personalities. For example, Knight is from high social class of the nobility, he acts as a peacemaker among other pilgrims, speaks like a gentleman and is probably meant to provide a point of contrast with the very different "low-born" behavior of characters like the Miller and the Reeve. Therefore, he chooses a story that is exactly what we'd expect of a perfect knight, a tale of two friends who fight for the same noble woman, containing battles, and courtly love.

While Chaucer applies characterization skills to present people from different classes of society, Attar's characters are designed in a way to indicate personality traits in human beings. Each bird has a special significance and didactic fault in the story. They face many difficulties on the way and, one by one, they drop out of the journey, each offering an excuse and unable to endure the way. The nightingale, for example, cannot leave his beloved; the Hawk is satisfied with his position at court waiting on earthly kings; the finch is too afraid to start the journey and so on. The hoopoe answers each of their excuses with anecdotes. Attar uses the collection of sayings and anecdotes connected with the lives of saints suggesting a bookish, rather scholarly man interested in the lives of those who had gone before him. Attar's birds represent devotees who are seeking almighty's greatness; therefore, we can consider that Reaching Simorgh means attaining celestial power and knowledge.

At the beginning, Attar chooses twelve birds from the group of thirty birds, and for each one, he writes 5 lines; these introductory lines have three elements, each section presents one bird, one prophet and one antagonist who stand against the prophet. The bird is represented in three concepts of fowl, devotee and soul, prophet by the concepts of leader, old man and God and antagonist by the concepts of ego, body and miscreant. This structure remains stable throughout the entire book. Physical properties and egoistical characteristics of these birds and their mythological backgrounds are also explained in introduction section.

The prophet acts as a guide and instructor while the antagonist tries to prevent the bird from going to the journey. In most cases, bird and prophet are congruous. For example, Hoopoe's introduction starts with a reference to his role in Solomon story. According The Holy Quran (30/27) Hoopoe is the bird that delivered Solomon's letter to Belgheisn (Queen of Sheba), Finch comes with Mussus (for their desire to meet God), Partridge with Saleh (for the common setting of mountain), Peacock with Adam (due to their presence in heaven), Parrot with Khezr (for his green feathers and its relation to eternity quest for devotees) and pheasant with Joseph (considering their relation with well). In some cases, there is no relation between the bird and the prophet; and Attar creates its own congruency. For example, Attar chooses francolin because it rhymes with Ascension. He writes that francolin is a bird who observed ascension.

### 3.4 Setting

Setting is the overall setting of a narrative or dramatic work is the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which its action occurs (M.H.Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 1999, p.284). It enables the reader to better vision how a story unfolds by connecting necessary physical details of a piece of literature. According to Hubbard-Brown (2006), the characters in *The Canterbury Tales* were on a trip to Canterbury Cathedral, to the shrine of Thomas Becket. England was full of shrines, but perhaps the most popular was the shrine of the murdered archbishop of Canterbury (Hubbard-Brown, 2006, p.26).

Befell that, in that season on a day,  
 In Southwark at the Tabard as I lay,  
 Ready to wenden on my pilgrimage  
 To Canterbury with devout corage,  
 At night was come into that hostelry  
 Well nine and twenty in a company  
 Of sundry folk, by aventure y-fall  
 In fellowship, and pilgrims were they all,  
 That toward Canterbury woulde ride. (*The Canterbury Tales*, 24)

Therefore, we can say that the general setting of *The Canterbury Tales* is the journey of thirty travelers from a small tavern outside London to Canterbury. It was the pilgrimage that linked the stories of the travelers together. A Pilgrimage is a journey to a holy place or shrine undertaken as a spiritual quest to obtain supernatural help or a form of penance for sins. In the Medieval Ages, pilgrimage was a social as well as a religious event and the only time when people from differing social classes could come together. One of the important aspects of *The Canterbury Tales* setting is that he uses a realistic setting instead of an idealistic one, in order to improve authenticity in the tales and their tellers.

Along with the main setting of *The Canterbury Tales*, the stories told by pilgrims also have their own setting, some of the places used in Chaucer's tales are Thebes, the city of Oedipus in Sophocles's Oedipus the Rex (the city of several

tales, including the Knight's Tale ), Oxford (city used in the Miller's Tale, and The Wife of Bath's Tale) , Cambridge (mentioned in Reeves' Tale) , Rome (the holy center of Christianity and the location of parts of several of the tales told on the journey. It is the home of Constance, (the Christian heroine of the Man of Law's Tale), Northumberland (the shore city where Constance is shipwrecked and lives in the Man of Law's Tale), Yorkshire in England (setting of Summoner's Tale), Saluzzo (the mountainous Italian city, which is the setting of the Clerk's Tale), and Flanders (the setting of the Pardoner's drunken tale of avarice and of the Tale of Sir Thopas).

As it was mentioned earlier, both authors use a long journey as a tool to create their settings. The setting in *The Conference of the Birds* takes us through the seven valleys, also known as seven cities of love, Attar introduces them as the valley of quest (in which one leaves all worldly attachments), love (one becomes so absorbed by love of God that forgets other desires), understanding (one with the help of his knowledge overcomes his faults and weaknesses), independence and detachment (one loses his desire to possess and becomes self sufficient), unity (one realizes that all creatures are from one source and if one loses himself in the divine essence, they will be transcended by love, astonishment) and finally deprivation and nothingness (When unity is achieved, one forgets all and loses oneself in the greatness of God). We can see all these seven stages in Sufi mysticism; Sufi scholars believe that any individual must pass these seven steps completely to realize the true nature of God. Eventually, only thirty birds remain as they finally arrive at Qaf Mountain. Qaf Mountain (Jabal Qaf) is a mysterious mountain of ancient Islamic tradition that is sometimes identified with North Pole, the "farthest point of the earth". "According to certain authors, the Jabal Qaf of Muslim cosmology is a version of Rupes Nigra, a mountain whose ascent, like Dante's climbing of the Mountain of Purgatory, represents the pilgrim's progress through spiritual states. In Iranian theosophy, the heavenly Pole, the focal point of the spiritual ascent, acts as a magnet to draw beings to its "palaces ablaze with immaterial matter." (Scheub, 2000)

We have a king; beyond Kaf's mountain peak

The Simorgh lives, the sovereign whom you seek,

And He is always near to us, though we

Live far from His transcendent majesty. (The Conference of the Birds, 15)

#### 4. Conclusion

Two major works of literature, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, display a number of strikingly similarities, in addition to a number of prominent differences. Both depict a figurative pilgrimage or journey, and in each case, the destination is the ultimate self-knowledge. Both works are the collections of stories that all fit in a larger story. By studying them, one can understand that their writers believed that the road to salvation is not an internal journey but it is a communal journey. By examining the people who have assembled for the pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in *The Canterbury tales* and 30 birds that finally reach Simurgh in *The Conference of the Birds*, one can sense the importance of society as a whole. Both writers believed that one person individually cannot reach salvation; path to redemption involves the interaction with and influence of other individuals. Each of Chaucer's pilgrims reveals a series of personal flaws while presenting their tales just like Attar's birds when they talk about themselves and bring an excuse to avoid the journey to find Simurgh. The appearances of characters, their speeches, and their behavior in each book also suggest another way to realize Chaucer and Attar's characters. In both of these stories, characters' roles, place, choice of story and even their turn in speaking is an important tool for characterization.

Attar uses a debate and discussion for presenting his story. In *The Canterbury Tales* also all the events revolve around discussion and communication between pilgrims. However, Birds in *The Conference of the Birds* use discussion style to bring an excuse for not going on a journey but Pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* discuss their social, religious and political views by participating in a game of telling tales.

The ideas which each author attempts to impart to his readers differ greatly in *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Conference of the Birds*. Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* shows the Roman Catholic influences in England during his lifetime, while Attar's book is influenced by Islamic and Sufism values and principles of his period. However, both authors were probably using their literary works in order to express their views, either purely religious or somewhat political.

In *The Conference of the Birds* we can find many allusions to holy tales about prophets' life stories. All thirty birds used in this work have references to one of the prophets or has been mentioned in the religious stories. Unlike Attar, religious ideas are not usually mentioned, except in terms of corruption and oppression in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, although the presence of Boethius philosophy in his work gives rise to some quite metaphysical debates on freedom and necessity.

Finally, we can conclude that Chaucer created realistic and objective events and characters and his purpose was to present political and social disruption of his age; Attar on the other hand, although refers to social corruptions, but he views them as obstacles that prevents men to grow spiritually. Attar's main goal was to show the right way for men to reach salvation.

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