Psychological Analysis of Sheikh San'aan by Using TAT

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Abstract

In this research, dramatic story of Sheikh San’aan, which is one of the stories in Conference of the Birds written by Attar Neyshaburi in the 6\textsuperscript{th} century hegira, is psychologically analyzed using Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), and analytical and descriptive methods. Sheikh San’aan is the hero of the story and a hermit who fell in love with a Christian girl in senility. The needs of hero’s id were confronted by his superego’s presses. Change and Travel were of the most distinguished needs and Affliction was the most prominent press of the hero. The process of change facilitated by ego throughout the story leads to catharsis and ultimately transcendence of dimensions of hero’s personality. The evolution of the hero and his achievement of needlessness against presses were assessed. Conflicts, anxieties and feelings of the hero were appraised towards his attainment of life's meaning. Finally, Attar’s universal and humanistic approach to life was further discussed based on his projections towards the story of Sheikh San’aan.

Keywords: Psychological analysis, Story of Sheikh San’aan, Thematic Apperception Test;

1. Introduction

The longest story in Faridoddin Attar Neyshaburi’s “The Conference of the Birds” is the story of Sheikh San’aan. This is the story of an ascetic who falls in love in his old age, thus entering a period of crisis. Various plays have been written based on this story. The fact that the tragedy of Sheikh San’aan can be performed as a play is reminiscent of Aristotle’s words (1943) to the effect that tragedy is “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with every kind of artistic ornament… through pity and fear, effecting the proper purification of these emotions,” thus reaching a catharsis. Sheik-e San’aan’s dramatic path entails passing through a crisis in old age and reaching a catharsis, which is the aim of theatre as well as psychology (Khosravi Khorashad, 2010). The process of passing through the stage of old age, arriving at a meaning of life and reaching catharsis is within the scope of psychology while it helps characters such as Sheikh San’aan, who are seeking spiritual development and transcendence. In many respects, psychology is indebted to literature.

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Freud had reached the conclusion that signs of discoveries in the field of human psyche exist in artistic and cultural works, much of which have remained from ancient times (Shamisa, 2007).

The important point is that, firstly, Attar’s “The Conference of the Birds,” a part of which is the story of Sheikh San’a’an, is one of the most prominent mystical works in world literature. Secondly, the elements of this story are based on many tales which have remained from the fourth lunar hegira century. Consequently, the two elements of being ancient and artistic, which are noteworthy to psychologists, can be found in this work.

Among works that have been analyzed by psychologists one can refer to tragedies such as Oedipus, Electra, Hamlet and others. The name of our story’s hero is also the title of the artistic work, which is yet another similarity between this work and ancient tragedies. A description of character, be it from the point of view of behavior or the character’s mental development, is within the domain of psychology (Adam & Revaz, 2004). Among the tools in psychology which aid in the understanding of character is Murray’s Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), which is a projective test of character (Groth-Marnat, 2007; Bahrami, 1993) believes that face value of stories examines the level of intelligence and correct thinking (Karami, 2007). Murray suggests five categories of content analysis: 1. The Hero 2. Needs 3. Press 4. Themes and Outcomes 5. Interests and Sentiments (Groth-Marnat, 1984).

In addition to an analysis of the work, this study also appraises an understanding of the author. This is while all the information there is on Attar is miniscule (Shafiee Kadkani, 2005).

Meanwhile, Maulana Jalaleddin Mohammad Rumi has referred to Attar in the following manner:

Attar passed through the seven cities of love While we still remain in the maze of an alley (Nuranivesal, 1970). Undoubtedly those familiar with the greatness of Rumi will wish to know Attar as well. In the present project, TAT is administered to Attar's ancient and artistic work so that by merging literature and psychology, the latent aspects of it may be revealed psychologically. Despite history’s emphasis on the presence of psychological traits in art and literature, it appears that psychologists have paid little attention to art. The novelty of this study is testimonial to such inattentiveness.

2. Methode

The present research was conducted using both descriptive and analytical methods. The tool used in this research was the Thematic Apperception Test. Instead of pictures, the story of Sheikh San’a’an was studied by analyzing its face and content dimensions.

The plot and dramatic structure of the story of Sheikh San’a’an in summary is as follow:

1. The stage of introduction of the hero: Sheikh San’a’an is an old sage who has spent over fifty years of his life on self-abnegation and asceticism; he lives in the city of Hejaz alongside 400 of his disciples. One night he becomes aware of the difficult path which lies ahead of him and resolves to travel to Rome which is far from Hejaz.

2. The stage of complication: in one instant in Rome the Sheikh’s eye falls upon a beautiful Christian girl. Love for this girl plunders the spirituality for which he has toiled all his life. The Christian girl lays four conditions for marrying the Sheikh: he must drink wine, become a swineherd, wear a zonnar (a girdle signifying that one is a Christian), and burn a Qur’an.

3. The stage of crisis: however much his disciples attempt to return the Sheikh to his original state, they fail to succeed. Losing all hope, his disciples leave the Sheikh and return to Hejaz.

4. Climax and denouement: the disciple who is closest to the Sheikh becomes aware of the Sheikh’s mental state. He compels the other disciples to follow the Sheikh, for he is in need of them now. For forty days and nights the disciples worship in a shrine in order to save the Sheikh. One disciple has a dream in which he sees the Prophet Mohammad has liberated the Sheikh from the love of the Christian girl. The disciples then go toward the Sheikh and find him mortified.

5. Resolution: Sheikh San’a’an performs ablutions and wears an Islamic cloak. Released from the love for the Christian girl, Sheikh San’a’an returns with his disciples to Hejaz. This is when the Christian girl has a dream in

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2 Based on the lunar calendar dating from the inception of Islam in 621 A.D.
which she sees the Sun (Christ) speaking to her, advising her to convert to the Sheikh’s religion. The girl then follows the Sheikh, through whom Islam is revealed to her. Upon converting to Islam, the Christian girl dies.

3. Results

Considering the elements in Thematic Apperception Test, the results of the study are presented by face and content analysis of the text.

A. The face aspect:

The story of Sheikh San’aan has been written in verses. To meet the requirements of being considered as a dramatic structure, the story should be complete and within an established length, that is, to have a beginning, a middle, and an end (Aristotle, 1943). Based on this definition, the story of Sheikh San’aan is complete while its elements are juxtaposed according to cause and effect relation. The poem contains rhythm and rhyme brimful of literary devices, simple expressions while using rich words which display Attar’s genius. Through expressing the hero’s needs and presses, the author is in some manner conveying those of his own. In his article entitled, “The Wound and the Bow,” Edmund Wilson portrays the play, “Philoctetes,” by Sophocles as a representation of the artist himself (Daiches, 2000). Similarly, by writing the story of Sheikh San’aan, Attar sketches a picture of his own character as a symbol.

B. The content aspect:

The essence of the needs and presses with which Sheikh San’aan is involved is content analyzed in the following.

1. The hero: Sheikh San’aan is quite obviously the hero of the story.
2. Interests and sentiments: Love has caused anxiety in the hero. The Sheikh’s interest is to unite with the Christian girl. However, this is in clear conflict with the aged Sheikh’s morals. Thus the story’s hero becomes enslaved in a chasm of internal conflict.
3. Theme: The premise of the story is love with an aim to unite with the lover (pantheism).
4. Outcome: through the prayers of his disciples, Sheikh San’aan overcomes the pressures of his environment. He attains an insight through which his needs are gradually minimized until he reaches ultimately a state of needlessness. Thus the hero succeeds in developing a sense of maturation.
5. Needs and presses: In the five stages of dramatic art, based on Murray’s list, the hero’s needs are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 and his presses are in Tables 4, 5, and 6. The intensity and kind of needs and presses in stages 2 and 3 are similar. Therefore, Tables 2 and 5 demonstrate the needs and presses in stages 2 and 3 of dramatic art. The fifth stage, the resolution of the story was devoid of any needs. Consequently no table was provided for this stage.

Table 1. The intensity of needs according to the distiches in the stage of introduction of hero

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Distiches</th>
<th>Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sheikh expresses need for travel for interpretation of his dream.</td>
<td>change, travel,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>adventure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sheikh with much awareness of upcoming calamities start on a journey;</td>
<td>achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he sees his success in a theological examination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sheikh reveals the secrets of his journey for the disciples</td>
<td>exposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sheikh’s action to travel is indicative of his need for understanding</td>
<td>understanding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the needs in table 1. are those which are motivated by desire for power, property, prestige, knowledge, or creative achievement. (Groth-Marnat, quoting Murray, 2007)

Table 2. The intensity of the needs according to distiches in stage of complication and crisis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Distiches</th>
<th>Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>By seeing the Christian girl, Sheikh falls in love and needs to compensate</td>
<td>counteraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for his lost youth.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sheikh needs to unite with the girl.</td>
<td>affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>For love, Sheikh acquiesces to the conditions of the girl and follows her.</td>
<td>deference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>For love, Sheikh needs to be united with the girl and have sexual relations</td>
<td>sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with her.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Need of mutual nurturance is sensed in Sheikh.</td>
<td>nurturance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sheikh does not listen to his disciples’ advice and act autonomously.</td>
<td>autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sheikh is saddened by his disciples abandoning him and by not succeeding</td>
<td>Change travel,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with the girl, and he needs to change.</td>
<td>adventure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sheikh attempts to unite with the girl at the cost of committing what he</td>
<td>abasement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>avoided all his life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. indicates that most of the needs are related to those which are motivated by affection, admiration, sympathy, love, and dependence (Groth-Marnat, quoting Murray, 2007) 

Table 3. The intensity of the needs according to the distiches in the stage of climax and denouement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intensity</th>
<th>Distiches</th>
<th>Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sheikh, who has rejected his disciples, now needs their nurturance.</td>
<td>nurturance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sheikh is ashamed to his god and disciples</td>
<td>blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The hero now needs to travel back to Hejaz; he seeks change from ignorance to wisdom.</td>
<td>change, travel, adventure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In stage 1, due to the need for understanding and achievement, the need for change and travel is expressed. In this stage, the hero views change as a duty and an imposed task. In stages 2 and 3, in the course of his journey, the hero needs affiliation and succorance. Therefore, in order to satisfy his needs, he pursues autonomy. The rejection of the hero causes affliction and creates an uncongenial environment. He insists on retaining his autonomy and although humiliated, he settles in a course of change. In stage 4, while avoiding blame, the hero feels the need for succorance. Suffering loss, sorrow, and loneliness, the hero attains insight which diminishes presses and leads to needlessness ultimately in stage 5.

The changes which the hero undergoes occur by means of facing the conflicts he has with the other characters in the story that is the Christian girl and the disciples. The girl and the disciples could be construed as symbolic manifestations of two dimensions of Sheikh San’aan’s own character.

The theme of the story, love and attainment of lover is the hero’s goal, while the opposite is the disciples’ wish. In the story, Attar describes the girl as young and beautiful. The hero’s needs are connection and sexual relations with the girl. In this context, the girl plays the role of Sheikh San’aan’s id. The setting for the id is in Rome. Based on Thematic Apperception Test, the girl represents the primitive and physiological needs of hero. The vigilant disciple, who is the Sheikh’s savior and compels other disciples to meet the desires of the Sheikh’s id could play the role of ego; other disciples play the role of superego, who, with the Sheikh’s falling in love, draw near to total annihilation.

Sheikh San’aan seems to be the representation of the Self, which is expression of unity, refinement, and harmony of the total character. A desire for transcendence is life’s main goal. As long as the other aspects of the psyche have not developed, the Self cannot be revealed. This is the most difficult process in life, which requires resistance, firmness, endurance, insight and wisdom (Schultz, quoting Jung, 2008). The whole character, for whom the city of Hejaz might be a metaphor, faces a breakdown by journeying to Rome and confronting new needs. Viewing this role psychologically, the dramatic structure of the work may be transformed to the following stages:

1. In some manner, the stage of the hero’s introduction is the same stage of the initial equilibrium of the needs.
2. The stage of complications can be contemplated as where the dominance of id takes over pressures of superego.
3. The stage of crisis can depict the appearance of ego’s action over the pressures of superego.
4. The climax and denouement maybe portraying the stage of reconstruction of superego in the face of id’s needs.
5. Resolution can be found in ultimate equilibrium, needlessness, and the appearance of the ideal character.

4. Discussion

In the symbolic story of Sheikh San’aan, the reader is faced with a controversy between Sheikh San’aan, his disciples, and the Christian girl. In light of appearance of new needs and presses, a conflict is created between the different dimensions of the hero’s character. Attar personified this internal conflict and rendered a dramatic story.

It starts at the stage of the initial equilibrium of the needs. All his life the Sheikh has complied fully with religious tasks and rituals which he considered to be his duties. Sheikh San’aan’s dutiful piety grants him equilibrium. The hero’s need to travel is in order to attain higher spirituality. The need for a journey acts as a metaphor for an internal journey. The dream of journey represents the Sheikh’s unconsciousness moving toward satisfaction of needs. The city of Hejaz representing Sheikh’s initial character is abandoned for Rome, which represents the Christian girl, that is the Sheikh's id.

At this stage, the id dominates over the pressures of the superego; the need for moral and spiritual development is replaced by basic physiological needs. Ultimately the structure of personality collapses; it is love at first sight! Sternberg (1991) calls “love at first sight” an “infatuation”. If one is unable to move beyond infatuation, true happiness will never be attained (Franken, 2005). For fifty years, Sheikh San’aan has repressed his sexual desires driving them to his unconsciousness, but those needs are now surfacing. In a dream, the Sheikh becomes aware of his journey to Rome. The aged hero now sees his himself in need of compensating for his lost youth. The unsatisfied needs generated much pressure and affliction making the hero’s environment uncongenial. In this stage, the abundance of needs and presses reach their highest level.

Sexual pressure causes the hero to accept the girl’s conditions. Although the Sheikh performs all the conditions laid down by the girl, he is unable to connect with her. Ultimately he reaches a state of hopelessness.

In old age, faced with hopelessness, people try to attain integration and consolidation of ego (Crain, 2009). This internal conflict may cause the aged person to attempt to develop his ego further by attainment of wisdom. Wisdom
may be manifested in various ways, but it is always a reflection of hopeful efforts for arriving at a meaning of life in face of death (Erikson, 1976). The story's hero is now challenged by a major conflict. Although Freud believed that man was unable to go over conflicts, nevertheless in the midst of conflicts man can arrive at a meaning of life. This meaning may be found in love and work while sublimating the instincts (Prochaska, 2004).

The shakeup in hero's life generating much anxiety laden conflicts paves the way for sublimation of his instincts and arriving at a new meaning of life. Of course, sublimation is a mature defense mechanism of ego, which provides the possibility of redirecting energy of id to socially acceptable activities (ibid). This is where the sole vigilant disciple acts in the role of hero's ego.

At this stage, the ego acts on the pressures of the superego.

In this stage, the needs and presses have the same intensity as in the previous stage. The Sheikh’s anxiety is on the rise, for the ego has not acted in an essential manner for the satisfaction of its needs. At times, the ego may act as mediator between the id and the superego, while it may side with one over the other (Schultz, 2008).

The vigilant disciple, the ego acts as mediator between the Sheikhs’s primeval needs, the Christian girl and his morals, the other disciples, his punishing superego. If the ego is able to create a balance between the needs of the id and the pressures of the superego, anxiety will be minimized.

Sheikh's age is another accentuated point in the dynamic drama. During the decade of fifties, the Sheikh is to experience major character logical changes in material, social, and arenas.

At this phase, one is to seek a new ego (ibid). The Sheikh is no exception. It is here where the vigilant disciple plays a different tune than the others. He is the flag holder, a leader, and a guide for the task of reconstruction. He is a defender of Sheikh who never left Hejaz. This disciple wishes to find ways to serve and to just hamper the needs of the hero’s id.

With the guidance of newly developing ego, the disciples’ action for helping the Sheikh begins. For forty days and nights, the disciples are secluded in a shrine, withdrawing into themselves. This seclusion is a sign of concession of the superego in the face of the needs of the id. In this period, the lifeless, punishing, and reproaching superego is refined by the ego; mediation occurs between the various dimensions of the Sheikh’s character. Meanwhile, one disciple has a dream in which the Prophet Mohammad reveals to him the good news, that their prayers have been answered and the Sheikh has been liberated from love. The development of the superego becomes possible in the unconscious through withdrawing. The ego succeeded in resolving conflict; yet how can the lost spirituality be regained?

At this stage, the seclusion which the disciples, that is the superego underwent was accompanied by love and the intense need for affiliation, while the Sheikh’s and the disciples’ initial seclusion were considered to be a duty bound and an imposed task. Here, the needs and presses are less intense compared to the previous stage, yet the story’s hero is mortified by the sins he has committed, becoming enslaved to moral anxiety. The moral anxiety, or sin, is a threat which is created due to the violation of inner morals (Prochaska, 2004). Thus, the disciples again act in the role of a reconstructed mature superego. They explain to the Sheikh that the Prophet has acted as mediator and suggest that he repent to be forgiven for his sin. In some manner, the disciples use the defense mechanism of rationalization, which reduces the Sheikh’s moral anxiety. Upon repenting, the Sheikh moves toward the new Hejaz, in search of a consolidated and refreshed character. It is during this period that the Christian girl in dream hears from the Sun, the Christ himself, to the effect that she must now follow the Sheikh and convert to his religion. The Sun is a symbol of awareness, the radiance of an afflicted with calamities and mature superego, which speaks logically and kindly with the id. The Christian girl, who was the outward representation of the needs of the id, is now tamed by the new superego. Rather than escaping the difficult path, the Sheikh came face to face with it. One might say that he chose to break down his own personality structure so that it may stand on new and firmer ground. The girl follows the Sheikh; once caught up with him she requests that he would present Islam to her. She then dies. The symbolic death of physical needs, that is, the id, in the face of a reconstructed superego, by means of a firm ego, guides the hero towards an ideal character.

At the final stage, a state of ultimate equilibrium is achieved. With appearance of the ideal character, the Sheikh is liberated from the needs of the id and now may continue on the adjusted path of his life.

In this stage, Sheikh San'aan is no longer the abstemious and sanctimonious character of the initial phase. Well aware of the power of the id's needs, the Sheikh faces up to the id and presents Islam to her. The Sheikh has reached the ideal Self and understands theosophical concepts, but this time within the society and not in the corner of a shrine.
By acting on the conditions of the Christian girl and self-abasement, the Sheikh is saved from under the burden of conceit and pride. In the initial stage, like stagnant water, the Sheikh was an ascetic in a shrine; whereas now, he runs, washes, and purifies like a deep and calm river while presenting Islam.

Attar’s projections in this story are signs of his genius. It is as if, he is Sheikh San’aan himself who is aware of the vicissitudes of his personality including his unconscious. Attar’s view of love begins with earthly love and ends in spiritual love. His purified character is reminiscent of the defense mechanism of sublimation. Greatness lies in a lack of need, but not through repression. This method of obtained needlessness results in liberation of self.

By prevailing over the needs of the id and in fact extracting energy from it to build a more suitable superego and eventually a more effective ego, Sheikh San’aan arrives at formulation of a unified Self. Attar used this unity as a metaphor for the total unity of man. His view of the world is pantheistic. The unification of the thirty birds in “Simorgh” (literally meaning thirty birds), which is the main theme of “The Conference of the Birds,” (sattari, 2008) is a testament to this claim. The basis of this view is that, in true unity, human beings attain a state of needlessness; Attar’s world view is humanistic.

Sheikh San’aan is a drama of curing the self. Unconscious messages are conveyed in the dreams of the Sheikh, the Christian girl, and the disciples, but all actions were performed in awareness, that is, in wakefulness. The needs of the id consciously accept death. The superego matures consciously and is reconstructed. The Sheikh transforms his unconscious into consciousness and, through it, raises the power of the ego. It is known that, Freud was the first person who considered his main goal to be “rendering conscious the unconscious” (Prochaska, 2004). This theory was also presented by Attar in the 6th century lunar hegira. The unconscious in dreams of Sheikh San’aan came to his aid. He reconstructed his ego defense mechanism and ultimately raised the limits of his endurance in his conscious mind, which resulted in the formation of a “higher Self”.

References


