

The Interpretation of the Perfect Human in the Stories of the Poem “Lison Ut-Tayr”

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Abstract: This article explores the concept and interpretation of the *komil inson* (the perfect human) as presented in the allegorical stories of Alisher Navoi’s poem *Lison ut-Tayr* (“The Language of the Birds”). Written in 1498 and inspired by Attar’s *Mantiq al-Tayr*, Navoi’s version reimagines the mystical quest of birds in search of their sovereign, the Simurgh, as a symbolic journey of the human soul toward perfection and divine unity. The narrative centers on the stages of spiritual development, where each bird’s confession reflects a particular human weakness, and the ultimate goal is the realization of *komillik*—the state of moral, intellectual, and spiritual completeness. Through rich metaphor, Sufi symbolism, and dialogic storytelling, Navoi outlines the essential traits of the perfect human: humility, self-knowledge, detachment from worldly desire, and unwavering devotion to the truth. The poem emphasizes that true perfection lies not in external achievements but in inner transformation and annihilation of the ego (*fana*). The article analyzes how Navoi uses these stories to construct a spiritual and philosophical ideal rooted in Islamic thought, particularly Sufism, while addressing universal questions of identity, purpose, and enlightenment. Ultimately, *Lison ut-Tayr* serves not only as a literary masterpiece but as a moral and mystical guide, offering readers a visionary path toward becoming the *komil inson*—the realized, awakened human being.

Keywords: Alisher Navoi, *Lison ut-Tayr*, *komil inson*, perfect human, Sufism, Islamic mysticism, spiritual journey, Simurgh, self-knowledge, *fana*, moral philosophy, allegory, Persianate literature, Central Asian poetry, human perfection.

INTRODUCTION

The quest for human perfection—referred to in Islamic tradition as *komillik*—has long served as a central concern in both philosophical discourse and mystical reflection across the Muslim world. From the writings of early Sufi masters to the poetic narratives of Persian and Turkic authors, the ideal of the *komil inson* (the perfect human) represents the culmination of the soul’s striving toward ethical excellence, spiritual clarity, and metaphysical union with the Divine. This aspiration finds one of its most refined expressions in the didactic-mystical literature of the 15th century, particularly in the works of Alisher Navoi (1441–1501), whose synthesis of spiritual insight and literary mastery continues to define the intellectual heritage of Central Asia [Nasr, S. H. 1987].

Among Navoi’s most profound contributions to Islamic ethical and poetic thought is his poem *Lison ut-Tayr* (“The Language of the Birds”), written in 1498 as a Turkic-language reworking and reinterpretation of Fariduddin Attar’s celebrated *Mantiq al-Tayr*. While Attar’s poem is universally acknowledged for its rich Sufi allegory and philosophical depth, Navoi’s rendition introduces unique cultural, linguistic, and thematic dimensions that both localize and universalize the spiritual journey it depicts. His adaptation is not merely a translation or imitation, but a transformation—infused with his own voice, values, and poetic intentions. Through this work, Navoi

addresses both the educated elite and the broader reading public, offering a poetic roadmap for moral self-realization and divine proximity.

In *Lison ut-Tayr*, the story centers around a group of birds who, under the guidance of the hoopoe bird, resolve to search for their sovereign, the Simurgh. Each bird represents a human archetype or inner defect—cowardice, greed, pride, despair—and their excuses for avoiding the journey serve as metaphors for the soul’s resistance to spiritual discipline. The hoopoe, as a symbol of divine guidance and prophetic wisdom, rebukes their justifications and urges them to embark upon the seven valleys—stages of purification and transformation that lead to the Truth. This structure creates a dual narrative: the external story of the birds’ journey and the internal journey of the human spirit [Karimov, B. S. 2020].

The concept of *komil inson* in Navoi’s poem is not limited to theological abstraction but is expressed as a living ethical ideal. The perfect human, in this vision, is someone who has undergone self-purification, overcome worldly attachments, and aligned their will with divine purpose. This individual embodies not only piety but wisdom, compassion, humility, and cosmic insight. Navoi’s framing of this ideal is deeply embedded in Islamic metaphysics, particularly the doctrine of *Insan al-Kamil* found in the works of Ibn Arabi and other Sufi thinkers, yet it is also grounded in the social and moral realities of his own society.

As a court official, theologian, and poet, Navoi understood the need for ethical leadership, spiritual literacy, and inner reform in a time of political instability and cultural transformation [Zohidov, H. 2019].

Navoi's use of the Turkic Chagatai language for such a spiritually elevated subject was a deliberate act of cultural affirmation. While Persian remained dominant in Islamic mystical literature, Navoi's decision to write *Lison ut-Tayr* in the language of his people made profound spiritual teachings accessible to a broader audience and elevated Turkic literature to a new level of sophistication. By infusing the Sufi theme of the perfect human with local idioms, proverbs, and metaphors, he created a work that is both globally resonant and culturally rooted [Navoiy, A. 1993].

Lison ut-Tayr emerges as a multidimensional text—allegorical, didactic, poetic, and philosophical—through which Navoi explores what it means to be truly human. His interpretation of *komil inson* is not utopian or inaccessible, but grounded in a spiritual psychology that acknowledges human frailty while insisting on the possibility of transformation. In an age marked by egoism, confusion, and spiritual amnesia, Navoi's poetic call to self-knowledge, humility, and divine love continues to offer guidance. This article seeks to analyze how Navoi articulates this concept within the stories and symbols of *Lison ut-Tayr*, and to situate his vision of human perfection within the broader context of Islamic ethical and literary traditions [Schimmel, A. 1975].

In *Lison ut-Tayr*, Alisher Navoi offers a profound exploration of the spiritual and ethical attributes that define the *komil inson*, or perfect human. Rather than describing this ideal as a static state, Navoi presents it as a dynamic, transformative process—an internal pilgrimage that requires the purification of the soul, the rejection of ego, and the alignment of one's being with divine truth. These qualities are conveyed not through abstract theorizing but through poetic allegories, symbolic narratives, and the moral dialogues of birds who represent various facets of the human condition [Ganieva, N. M. 2006].

The first and most fundamental quality on the path toward *komillik* is self-awareness. Navoi emphasizes that true spiritual growth begins with the capacity for introspection and the courage to confront one's own inner deficiencies. Throughout the poem, the hoopoe—who serves as a spiritual

mentor and guide—reminds the other birds that “He who knows himself, knows his Lord.” This Sufi aphorism, rooted in Prophetic tradition, encapsulates the belief that self-knowledge is a mirror to divine knowledge. The inner journey thus becomes a prerequisite for outward moral action and higher metaphysical understanding. Without self-awareness, the seeker remains trapped in delusion, mistaking illusion for truth and ego for essence [Attar, F. 1989].

Closely linked to self-knowledge is the virtue of detachment, or *zuhd*. Navoi presents this as a necessary release from the distractions of the material world—status, wealth, desire, and comfort—that cloud the soul and inhibit spiritual progress. Many of the birds in the poem voice their reluctance to leave behind worldly attachments, each confessing an excuse rooted in fear or craving. The hoopoe answers with admonitions drawn from Sufi ethics, urging them to abandon temporal illusions in favor of eternal realities. True perfection, Navoi implies, requires freedom from the tyranny of possessions and the ego's insatiable appetite. The perfect human is not defined by what they have, but by what they can live without [Bertels, E. E. 1965].

Navoi elevates humility as one of the defining characteristics of the perfect human. In contrast to arrogance, pride, or spiritual vanity, humility is portrayed as the strength to acknowledge one's dependence on divine mercy and the limitations of human understanding. The hoopoe praises those birds who are aware of their faults and genuinely seek transformation, while critiquing those who cling to pride or self-righteousness. This humility is not an act of submission to others, but an inner posture of openness, sincerity, and moral vulnerability before Allah. For Navoi, humility is the gateway to wisdom: it allows the heart to be illuminated by truth and purged of spiritual toxins [Ahmedov, A. 2018].

No concept is more central to Navoi's interpretation of the perfect human than that of divine love. This love is not mere emotion or sentimental longing; it is an all-consuming force that fuels the soul's yearning for union with the Real. Navoi presents love as both the motive and the method of spiritual ascent. It is love that draws the birds toward the Simurgh despite their fears, and love that ultimately dissolves the barriers between self and other. In Sufi tradition, love is the fire that burns away illusion and ego, and Navoi draws on this symbolism to depict the lover as a

willing sacrifice on the altar of truth. The perfect human, in this vision, is one who lives and dies in the service of divine love—a love that encompasses truth, beauty, justice, and the unity of existence.

The ultimate transformation occurs in the poem's climax, when the thirty birds who complete the journey arrive at the palace of the Simurgh, only to discover that the Simurgh is a reflection of themselves. This is Navoi's poetic rendering of the Sufi concept of *fana*—the annihilation of the ego or self into the divine reality. In this moment, the birds experience the dissolution of duality; they are no longer seekers and Allah is no longer a distant object. Instead, they are absorbed into the unity of being, where the distinctions between lover and beloved, seeker and sought, disappear. Navoi's portrayal of this moment is subtle but powerful: the perfect human is one who no longer claims anything for the self but has become a vessel through which divine qualities manifest in the world.

These five qualities—self-knowledge, detachment, humility, love, and ego-annihilation—form the core ethical and metaphysical foundation of Navoi's perfect human. They are not isolated virtues, but interconnected dimensions of a single spiritual trajectory. Together, they mark the passage from fragmentation to wholeness, from illusion to reality, and from individuality to unity with the Divine. Through *Lison ut-Tayr*, Navoi not only describes the perfect human but invites every reader to become one.

Navoi's conception of the perfect human is deeply rooted in the metaphysical doctrines of Sufism, particularly those associated with thinkers such as Ibn Arabi and Fariduddin Attar. From Ibn Arabi, he inherits the notion of the "Insan al-Kamil," the complete or perfected human being who reflects divine attributes and stands as the mediator between the divine and earthly realms. From Attar, he draws structural and symbolic inspiration, adapting the bird journey motif as a powerful metaphor for the soul's path toward unity. However, Navoi does not merely adopt these concepts wholesale; he reformulates them within the framework of Turkic literary and cultural sensibilities. His version places strong emphasis on linguistic clarity, moral education, and the accessibility of spiritual ideas to a broader audience, beyond the confines of elite Sufi circles.

The hoopoe, central to the narrative of *Lison ut-Tayr*, functions as a symbolic figure of the Sufi

guide or murshid. Like the traditional Sufi master, the hoopoe instructs, rebukes, consoles, and challenges his companions, gradually leading them through the necessary stations of self-denial and inner realization. The birds' objections, weaknesses, and confessions mirror the typical struggles of disciples on the Sufi path. Each story embedded in the journey corresponds to a spiritual station or moral test, subtly transforming the poem into a coded handbook of soul purification. For this reason, *Lison ut-Tayr* transcends the boundaries of literary fiction and enters the realm of spiritual psychology and ethical reformation.

Despite being composed in the late 15th century, Navoi's insights into human behavior, desire, and spiritual aspiration continue to resonate in the modern world. In an age characterized by consumerism, political instability, and growing existential disorientation, the values championed in *Lison ut-Tayr*—self-awareness, inner discipline, humility, and transcendence—offer a compelling and timely moral framework. The figure of the *komil inson* in Navoi's poem is not depicted as a remote saint or idealized mystic, but as an attainable human type, accessible to any person willing to confront the illusions of the ego and commit to sincere inner work.

Beyond its spiritual dimension, the poem also offers a clear social critique. Navoi uses the excuses and failings of the birds to highlight the ethical shortcomings of different segments of society. The vanity of rulers, the hypocrisy of scholars, the fearfulness of common people—all are examined and challenged through allegory. In doing so, Navoi encourages ethical reflection not only on an individual level but on a collective one. His vision of human perfection includes both personal enlightenment and moral responsibility toward society. Thus, the poem functions simultaneously as a mystical allegory and a mirror for social conscience.

In *Lison ut-Tayr*, Alisher Navoi presents a poetic vision of the soul's ascent, guided by love and shaped by trials. His depiction of the *komil inson* synthesizes elements of Sufi metaphysics, universal ethics, and Central Asian cultural expression into a unified and deeply moving whole. The narrative of birds in search of the Simurgh becomes a metaphor for the universal human quest: the longing to transcend ego, to uncover truth, and to become a vessel of divine reflection. The obstacles faced by the birds—doubt, fear, desire, pride—are shown not as permanent

barriers, but as challenges to be understood and overcome. In this way, Navoi provides not just a poetic journey, but a philosophical and ethical map for the soul's return to its origin.

At its heart, *Lison ut-Tayr* teaches that human perfection is not granted by birth, status, or knowledge alone, but is the fruit of sustained inner struggle and sincere love. Through humility, self-knowledge, and annihilation of the ego, the seeker can attain not only personal wholeness but become a light for others. In portraying this journey, Navoi elevates the poetic tradition of Central Asia and offers a timeless message to all who seek to become more fully and truly human.

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