Understanding concept of Tabiat (Physis) in the view of Unani physicians: A literature review

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**ABSTRACT:** The main concern of the Unani system of medicine is health of human body and its maintenance is the main function of Tabi’at. The word Tabi’at has an Arabic origin derived from the taba’; pleural is tabae- means natural or inborn. Tabi’at maintains e’taad-e-mizāj (normal constitution) which is the basis of health. It is explained in unani literature that when Tabi’at is strong, it regulates all physiological functions of the body. It also protects the body from all abnormal and pathological conditions. Ancient physicians described the word Tabi’at in different meanings like mizāj-e-badan (body’s constitution), ha’it-e-tarkhiba (structural integrity), harkāt nafsāniyya (psychological movements) and quwwat (body’s faculty). The present paper is a literature review of different Unani physicians regarding the concept of Tabi’at (Physis).

**Key Words:** Tabiat, mizaj, health, Unani, physiology.

**Introduction:**

Unani system of medicine is based on the seven basic principles known as *Umur tabi’iyya*; they are *arkān* (basic constituents), *mizāj* (constitution), *akhlāt* (humours), *a’dā* (organs), *arwāh* (pneuma), *quwā* (faculties), and *af’al* (functions). These all components form the base of a healthy human being determining its state of health and disease. Unani literature suggests that all living things (plants & animals) are composed of four *arkān*.[3,4] These are *ard* (earth), *ma* (water), *hawā* (air), and *nār* (fire)[3,4,5] and having similar as well as contrary properties. The *ruki* composition of a substance determines its specific nature, attribute, property or action. *Rukn ard* provides structural integrity to the substance where *ma*, *hawā* and *nār* are essential for life in other aspect. (4) Because of opposing properties, *arkān* tend to get apart from corporeal things; hence a force *Tabi’at* is known as *quwwat-e-mudabibira lil badan* which necessary to keep them in association for the integrity of body, as there is continuous dissolution of body due to physiological processes. Therefore *arkan* also require a constant supply of replenishment for continuation of life in corporeal things. Otherwise, they will disintegrate and life will cease. (2)

**Review of literature:**

**Etymology of Tabi’at:**

*Tabi’at* is an Arabic word denotes the meaning as *khillq* (inborn), *jibill* (congenital), *aadar* (habit), *fitrat* (nature), *mizāj* (constitution).[6,7] The word *Tabi’at* is derived from the *taba’*; pleural is *tabae-* means natural or inborn.[6,7] In an Arabic dictionary Al-Mojamul Al-Waseet; *Tabi’at* is defined as the natural or inborn faculty endowed in the body. Basically “*Tabi’at* is considered as constitution of human body, composed of *akhlāt* (humours) and it is a power which travels inside the body, by which body reaches *kamal-e-tabae*”(normal physiological state). It is also defined as a faculty in the body by which all functions are completed. (8)
Definitions of Tabiat:
Aristotle (384-322 BC): defined Tabi’at by tracing the history of the word itself. According to him Tabi’at (Phusis/Physis) is considered to be derived ultimately from the Indo-European root bheu. According to Julius Pokorny, the original meaning of bheu was “to grow” or “to flourish” or, perhaps, “to swell.” Since growth and flourishing are closely interlinked to the existence of living things, the meaning of bheu thus evolved to describe existence itself, and so bheu also stand for “to come to be, to become, to be” and often is related “to live or dwell.” So it can be observe that the focal meaning of the root bheu was one of growing and flourishing. Obviously these processes are closely linked to life and procreation, so the root and many of its derivatives functioned as an existential verb. In various languages, bheu was a source of words naming things that are closely related both to the source of life, e.g. the earth, to living things, and plants. (9) Aristotle further said about Tabi’at that it is “an archē or aitia” of change and of remaining the same in that to which it belongs first and foremost, in virtue of itself and not accidentally”. (9)

Hippocrates (460-377 BC): explained it originally as Medicatrix Naturae. (10) In the orient, it is known as Chi (energy) in Chinese Medicine, and as Prana in Ayurvedic Medicine. In the West, it is termed as the “life force”, Nature in Naturopathy, and variously referred as the vital force, divine wisdom, mother nature and the Hierarchical Principle in other forms of natural medicine. (9)

Emile Benveniste (1902-1976): quoted Tabi’at (phasis) as the “completion of a becoming or nature in so far as it is realized with all its properties” for Greek words ending in -sis signify “the abstract notion of the process conceived as an objective realization” therefore, 'phasis' was used to refer the process of completion of a thing’s growth, birth, or production. (9)

Tabi’at is also known as our life force. It has been described as our vital spark, and the governing principle of our existence. It is an old concept, with a history going back millennia, embodied in many forms of natural medicine. It operates not only in our own bodies, but also present in all living creatures. It is the healing power of nature, inborn from the moment of our conception, and lasts until our last breath. It is not a force which is open to direct experience. It does not reside as a discrete entity or structure within the body. It exists as a construction which organizes and controls all aspects of on existence daily basis. It is only evident through its effects and qualities, especially the ability to keep the body in dynamic equilibrium or homeostasis. (11)

Ancient physicians used the word Tabi’at in the following different manners as:
(i) Genesis of growing things.
(ii) Part from which growth begins.
(iii) Internal principle of movement in natural objects.
(iv) "Unshaped and unchanging matter" from which natural, or possibly unnatural, objects are produced.
(v) Substance (ousia) of natural objects. (9)

Basic concept of Tabi’at in Unani system of medicine:
The main concern of the Unani system of medicine is health of human body whereas maintenance of health is the main function of Tabi’at. Tabi’at maintain e’tadal-e- mizāj (normal constitution) in the body which is the basis of health. (1) When Tabi’at is strong, it maintains the physiology of all organs and keeps and results in healthy body. It also protects the body from all abnormal and pathological conditions. (12) Tabi’at als plays a vital role in association of arkān-e-arba’ā for the integrity of the body because as corporeal bodies are concerned according to Unani system of medicine they are made from arkān of opposite and same properties. Due to opposite property these arkān tends to get apart from corporeal things, hence a force is necessary to keep their organization and Tabi’at is that force which organizes all arkān. (12) Tabi’at accomplish its all efforts to make the body fit and healthy because it is a supreme planner which works for welfare of the body independently and unconsciously. (13)

Tabi’at which is a supreme planner, as described above creates a healthy environment within the body and prepare to fight against the diseases. If it is strong, then a person does not suffer from any type of disease easily: if it weakens, person becomes prone to disease easily. The Tabi’at may be defined as the sum total of structural, functional and psychological character of the human being. Basically in every individual there is a special hidden ability called the administrative mechanism of the body or muddabar-e-badan known as Tabi’at. (14)

Views of different Unani physicians regarding its concept:
A well-known Unani Scholar, Rabban Tabri in his treatise, Firdousal Hikmat has mentioned that, practically Tabi’at is considered as an administrative power of the body. (3) The function of administration is
accomplished by Tabi'at with the help of other faculties of the body called quwwat. Tabi'at means a quwwat (faculty) which is responsible for all physiological functions of the body. He also explained that "theoretically Tabi'at may be defined as source of motion and rest because existence of everything is initiated by motion and rest. Rest is the end of their existence and practically Tabi'at may be defined as it is the administrative faculty of the body". 

Hippocrates said that Tabi'at is that quwwat which is an executive power of the body, source of all motions and rest.(2)

Abu Sahl Masihi described in his book Kitab al-Mi'a that Tabi'at is the faculty/power which regulate functions of the body involuntarily and perform suitable actions accordingly.(12) Ahmad bin Mohammad Tabri defined Tabi'at in his book Moalijat Buqratia that "Tabi'at is the source of motion and rest" explaining that all natural and living thing continuously undergoes into genesis and terminus. The genesis of one thing and terminus of another thing depends upon each other. Genesis depends upon harkat and transformation. So Tabi'at is the source of motion for both genesis and terminus of anything as these two processes run simultaneously. When motion deviates and goes towards rest at that time destruction of that thing occurs. He further stated that Galen said when we says Tabi'at or taba its means quwwat-e-mudabbira of all living bodies. In addition of it Ahmad bin Mohammad Tabri postulates that Tabi'at takes part in the growth and development of the body. It expel out the waste products which formed after nutrition and replenishment in the body.(15)

Ghulam Jelani stated in his Makhznul Jawahir that Tabi'at is the quwwat mudabbir-e-badan Hippocrates called this Tabi'at as a quwwat (faculty) which works for the welfare of the body independently and maintains homeostasis.(13)

According to Plato (428-348 BC): Tabi'at is a God gifted faculty which is postulated for all welfare functions of the body or all body functions are executed by Tabi'at.(4) Aristotle said that Tabi'at is the hidden performer and is the source of all motion and rest of the living things. Hidden performer means Tabi'at executes all functions in the body and person is unaware of them. On other hand there is nafas which performs body functions with the help of quwwat and Tabi'at indirectly. The difference between Tabi'at and nafas is that Tabi'at is an independent faculty which is present in the body and nafas is the simple essence which works for the body with the help of Tabi'at.(13)

Akbar Arzani explained in his book Mufrerehul Qulub that "Tabi'at is a quwwat which is the source of motion and rest in the human body and works independently". (4)

Allama Qarshi said that the word Tabi'at stands for four things:
1) Mizāj-e-Badan (constitution of body)
2) Haiat-e-tarkibi of Badan (structural integrity of body)
3) Quwwat-e-Mudabbra of Badan (Administrative faculty of body)
4) Harkat-e-Nafas (psychological movements)

He further explained Tabi'at is that quwwat / faculty which performs all functions of that body in which it exists. Some other scholars said that Tabi'at is the first source of motion and rest in which body it exists.(4) Ali Ibne Abbas Majoosi mentions in his book Kamilus Sana that "Tabi'at itself recover the body from diseases" as small wounds heal by themselves and mild pain is relieved only by a sound sleep in most of the cases. Some times Tabi'at performs its functions to relieve the body from different ailments. It has been seen in dead bodies that Tabi'at does not exists so there is no sign of inflammation or healing recognized, decomposition starts and finally body is completely decayed.(16)

In Kitabul Murshid, Zakria Razi said that "Tabi'at provides recovery from diseases and expel out the waste material from human and living being". It makes body free from waste and harmful substances. The existence of Tabi'at can also be understood with some examples such as, mostly small wound heals itself without any treatment and various kinds of pains and diseases are relieved or recovered after deep sleep or as the time passes. This all is because of administrative and managing power of Tabi'at. The functions related with life such as replenishment, growth and development are seen only in living bodies. Dead bodies neither accept any replenishment and neither acted upon by any medicine, because absence of Tabi'at in dead bodies.(17)

With the association of advanced physiological and pathological information it can understand, that when any foreign body or harmful substance enters in the body Tabi'at becomes ready to expel out and protect from that harmful substance. For example body reaction and changes may be seen during injury, inflammation starts at the site of injury and it is a natural defence of the body involving the immune cells, vessels and molecular mediators.(18) The intention of inflammation is to eliminate the cause and return the damaged part on its original forms or condition. Tabi'at accumulates the blood in excessive amount at the
site of injury. The different cells of the blood play a vital role to localize the injury as well as start healing process through inflammation.\(^{(19)}\)

Now a day’s environmental studies proved that there is a administrative mechanism in human body to face different environmental changes and potentiate the body to perform all physiological functions without any adverse effect of the environment on the body.\(^{(14)}\)

**Conclusion:** From above explanation it is clear that Tabi’at may be defined as the sum total of structural, functional and psychological character of the human being. It is a supreme planner of the body that creates a healthy environment and prepares to fight against the diseases. If it is strong, then the person does not suffer from any type of disease easily: if it weakens, the individual becomes prone to disease easily. It is the best physician, and maintains the equilibrium of basic body humours. For the maintenance of health, the quantity and quality of these humours should be as per the optimum composition of the body. Tabi’at is considered as the real healer of the body and the role of the physician is to assist this Tabi’at.

**References:**