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A comparative literature review on the fundamental principles of *Ayurveda* and *Unani* systems of medicine.

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Abstract :

Traditional systems of medicine have long played a crucial role in the cultural and therapeutic landscapes of civilizations across the globe. Among them, *Unani* and *Ayurvedic* medicine stand out as time-tested systems that offer holistic approaches to health and disease. This comparative literature review explores the foundational principles underlying both medical traditions, tracing their historical evolution, philosophical concepts, and basic physiological frameworks.

Unani medicine, rooted in Greek and Arabic traditions, emphasizes the balance of four humors (*Akhlat*) and seven physiological principles (*Umur Tabiyya*), governed by external and internal influences known as *Asbab Sitta Zaruriyya*. *Ayurveda*, with its origins in the Indian subcontinent, is based on the balance of *Doshas* (*Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*), the concept of *Panchamahabhutas*

(five elements), and a comprehensive understanding of body, mind, and spirit.

The paper highlights key similarities in elements such as temperament (*Mizaj/Veerya*), tissue classification, and health definitions, underscoring the value of integrative perspectives. The review also discusses how both systems were suppressed during colonial rule and later revived under government initiatives, especially with the formation of the Ministry of AYUSH. This study serves as a foundation for deeper research into integrative medicine and fosters cross-cultural understanding of ancient health sciences.

Keywords : *Unani* Medicine, *Ayurvedic* Medicine, Comparative Study, *Panchamahabhuta*, *Umur Tabiyya*, *Dosha*, *Mizaj* (Temperament), Traditional Medicine System.

Introduction :

The *Unani* system of medicine has its origin in Greece. The herbal basis of *Unani* therapy can be traced back to its earliest originators in ancient Egypt, who gave primary place to plants in treatment of diseases⁽¹⁾.

Some well known physicians who laid the foundation of *Unani* medicine and established it are *Hippocrates* (460-370 BC), *Galen* (129-200 AD), Arab physicians like *Rhazes* (865-925 AD) and *Avicenna* (980 – 1037 AD)⁽²⁾.

Unani medicine got enriched by imbibing what was best in the contemporary systems of traditional medicines in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Persia, India, China and other middle east and far east countries.

Likewise, the origin of *Ayurveda*⁽³⁾ has historical and mythological references. It is being practiced by Indian physicians since 2nd century BC. The golden age of Indian medicine was from 800 BCE to 1000 BCE during which all the important books and literature about *Ayurveda* were produced and circulated throughout the world. There was huge exchange of information on the traditional systems of medicine amongst Greece, Egyptians, Persians, Chinese, Indians, Romans, Arabs and Tibetians.

Ayurveda is based on various treatises namely *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushrut Samhita*, *Ashtang Hruday* etc⁽⁴⁾. All these include detailed information about basic principles on how the human should behave, how its body works, ways of life, pathophysiology of various diseases and their treatment, various medicinal plants, herbo – mineral and

metallic compounds used for treatment along with the methods to prepare them.

Ayurveda and Unani systems of medicine in India –

All contemporary medical sciences faced a setback during the British rule due to the popularity and encouragement of western medicine⁽⁵⁾. They were revived again during the time of independence and since then the government of India has been promoting them by forming department of AYUSH in ministry of family welfare. Since November 9, 2014, the dept of AYUSH has been elevated to MINISTRY OF AYUSH which regulates the Indian systems of medicines⁽⁶⁾.

Definition of health according to Unani medicine – Equilibrium of four humors (*akhlaat – dam, balgham, sauda, safra*) and normal functions of the body in accordance to its own temperament (*mizaaj*) and environment is known as health⁽⁷⁾.

Health can also be defined as the appropriate proportion of *umur tabiyya* (7 basic physiological principles) under influence of *asbab sita daruriyya* (six essential factors)⁽⁸⁾.

Similarly, definition of health according to Ayurveda –

समदोषःसमग्निश्चसमधातुमलःक्रियाः।

प्रसन्नात्मेन्द्रियमनःस्वस्थइतिभिधीयते॥

- *Su.Su 15/10*⁽⁹⁾

When *doshas, agni, dhatus, malas* and their activities are in balanced state and when the *atma, indriya, mana* are in sound state, it is called health.

Unani system of medicine is based on Umur Tabiyya (7 basic physiological principles)⁽¹⁰⁾

Sr. No	Unani medicine	Ayurvedic medicine
1	<i>Arkan</i> (elements)- 1. <i>Arz</i> (earth) 2. <i>Maa</i> (water) 3. <i>Nar</i> (fire) 4. <i>Hawa</i> (air)	<i>Pancha Mahabhoot</i> – 1. <i>Pruthvi</i> (earth), 2. <i>Jal</i> (water), 3. <i>Tej</i> (fire), 4. <i>Vayu</i> (air), 5. <i>Aakash</i>
2	<i>Mizaj</i> (Temperament)- 1. Hot 2. Cold 3. Moist 4. Dry	<i>Veerya</i> 1. <i>Ushna</i> 2. <i>Sheeta</i>
3	<i>Akhlat</i> (humours) – 1. <i>Dam</i> (blood) 2. <i>Balgam</i> (phlegm) 3. <i>Sauda</i> (black bile) 4. <i>Safra</i> (yellow bile)	<i>Dosha</i> (humours) – 1. <i>Vata</i> 2. <i>Pitta</i> 3. <i>Kapha</i> 4. <i>Rakta</i> * (acc to <i>sushrut Acharya</i>)
4	<i>Aaza</i> (organs or systems) 1. <i>Basit</i> (simple) – <i>fat, bone etc</i> 2. <i>Murakkab</i> (compound) – <i>heart, brain, liver etc</i>	<i>Dhatu</i> (tissues) – <i>Rasa, Rakta, Mamsa, Meda, Asthi, Majja, Shukra</i> and the various organs and organ systems developing from these <i>dhatu</i> s.
5	<i>Arwah</i> (<i>Rooh</i> – vital spirit)	<i>Chetna/ Mana</i>
6	<i>Quwa</i> (faculties or powers)	<i>Indriya</i> (faculties)
7	<i>Afaal</i> (functions)	<i>Kriya</i> (functions) – 1. <i>Utshepan</i> (Upward direction) 2. <i>Apakshepan</i> (Downward direction) 3. <i>Akunchan</i> (Flexion) 4. <i>Prasaran</i> (Extension) <i>etc.</i>

These 7 basic principles are influenced by 6 essential factors called as *Asbab sita daruriyya*⁽¹¹⁾. *Ayurveda* also says that the

dosha and *dhatu*s can be affected by the *aahar, vihara* and *manasik bhava* etc. adopted by the patient.

Sr. no	<i>Asbab sita daruriyya</i>	<i>Ayurvedic medicine</i>
1	<i>Hawa</i> (air)	<i>Vayu</i>
2	<i>Makulat wa mashubarat</i> (food and drinks)	<i>Aahar</i>
3	<i>Harkat o sakoon e badani</i> (exercise and repose)	<i>Vyayam</i>
4	<i>Harkat o sakoon e nafsani</i> (mental work and rest)	<i>Chinta</i>
5	<i>Naum o yaqzah</i> (sleep and wakefulness)	<i>Nidra</i>
6	<i>Istifragh wa itihis</i> (excretion and retention)	<i>Malavisarjan</i>

Treatment modalities in Unani medicine (Acc. to Ibn sina/ Avicenna) and similarities in Ayurvedic medicine⁽¹²⁾

1. *Ilaj bit tadbeer wal ghiza* :

a. ***Ilaj bil ghiza (Dietotherapy)*** - Unani medicine lays great stress on treating certain ailments by administration specific diets or by regulating the quality and quantity of food.

In addition to nutrition properties several foods are capable of pharmacological actions too. For example many foods are laxative, diuretic and diaphoretic. Eggs are used as food for energy and externally used in fractures to relieve pain and to cure baldness. Sagu is good for diarrhoea. The weakness of certain organs is corrected by administering the same organ of an animal by way of food; for instance, disorders and weakness of liver are treated by feeding the patient on liver. Likewise heart, kidneys and brain are administered in treating the ailments of these parts.

Dietotherapy in Ayurveda : In Ayurveda, *Ahāra*, or the food we consume, is regarded as a form of *Mahābhaisajya*—a supreme medicine. *Kashyapa* emphasized its vital role in sustaining health and establishing stability. According to

this tradition, diet is the foundation of all living functions—supporting life, strength, complexion, tissue nourishment, vitality, growth, sensory clarity, voice, mental acuity, satisfaction, and overall well-being.

The balance of the *doshas (Vata, Pitta, Kapha)*—whether elevated, diminished, or stable—is influenced by food’s *rasa* (taste), *guna* (attributes), *virya* (potency), and *vipāka* (post-digestive effect). *Sushruta* and *Charaka* emphasized that physicians must understand each of these qualities in foods and drinks—across their forms, combinations, and preparation methods—to effectively guide in health maintenance and disease prevention. By consistently following these dietary principles and exercising self-control, individuals—guided by wisdom—one can enjoy a disease-free life, potentially reaching full lifespan, nourished entirely through wholesome and balanced nutrition.

b. ***Ilaj bit tadbeer (Regimental therapy)*** – Alteration or modification of six essential factors. It can be correlated with *shodhan chikitsa*, primarily *panchakarma* therapy⁽¹³⁾⁽¹⁴⁾.

Sr. no	<i>Ilaj bit tadbeer</i>	<i>Panchakarma or allied karma</i>
1	<i>Riyazat</i> (Exercise)	<i>Vyavyam</i>
2	<i>Dalak</i> (Massage)	<i>Snehan/ udgharshan</i>
3	<i>Takmeed</i> (Fomentation)	<i>Swedan</i>
4	<i>Nutool</i> (Irrigation)	<i>Parishek</i>

5	<i>Zimaad wa tila</i> (Ointments/ medicated paste/ Liniments)	<i>Lepa/ snehan</i>
6	<i>Tareeq</i> (Sweating/ Diaphoresis)	<i>Swedan</i>
7	<i>Hammam</i> (Snan)	<i>Bath</i>
8	<i>Ishaal</i> (Purgation)	<i>Virechan</i>
9	<i>Qai</i> (Emesis)	<i>Vaman</i>
10	<i>Huqna</i> (Enema)	<i>Basti</i>
11	<i>Hijama</i> (Cupping)	<i>Rakta mokshan (alabu)</i>
12	<i>Fasd</i> (Venesection)	<i>Rakta mokshan (siravedh)</i>
13	<i>Taleeq</i> (Leech Therapy)	<i>Raktamokshan (jaloukavcharan)</i>
14	<i>Kai</i> (Cauterization/ Heat Therapy)	<i>Agnikarma</i>

2. Ilaj bid dawa (Pharmacotherapy) : In the field of Pharmacotherapy the *Unani* system of medicine displays a unique wealth of knowledge and experience which went into the building up of this branch of treatment. According to *Unani* System of medicine drugs having states opposite to those present in the diseases should be applied. Natural drugs like plants, minerals and animal drugs are more advisable in this system. Some other principles related to Pharmacotherapy may be mentioned as under.

1. *Mizaj-e-Adwiya* (Drugs Temperament).
2. *Darajat-e-Adwiya* (Potency of drugs)
3. Mode of action
4. *Kaifiyat* (Division of drugs according to quality)
5. Action of Drugs on Particular Organs
6. Use of *Munzij* (coctive) and *Mushil* (purgative)
7. Dosage and Timings
8. Route of Drug Usage
9. Forms and Shapes of Drug Usage
10. Compounding and Correction of Harmful Effects of Drugs.

Pharmacotherapy in Ayurveda : In *Ayurveda*, pharmacotherapy—

Yuktivyapashraya chikitsa—refers to the therapeutic use of medicinal substances (herbs, minerals, organics) to treat or prevent illness. It's one of three pillars of treatment, alongside spiritual (*Daivavyapashraya*) and psychological therapies (*Satvavajaya*).

• *Ayurvedic* drug therapy splits into two complementary styles:

1. *Shodhana* (Purificatory therapy): Involves cleansing procedures like emesis, purgation, and medicated enemas to eliminate accumulated toxins (*ama*) and balance *doshas*.
 2. *Shamana* (Palliative therapy): Uses cooling, heating, digestives, herbal oils, and decoctions to pacify *doshas* without expelling them.
- *Ayurvedic* medicines are chosen based on their classical attributes (drug *dravya* characteristics).
 - *Rasa, Guna, Virya, Vipaka, Prabhava* – these define taste, qualities, potency, post-digestive effect, and specific action. Treatment is personalized according to the

individual's *Prakriti* (constitution), current *Dosha* imbalance, digestive strength (*Agni*), disease stage (*Samprapti*), and tissue state (*Dhatu, Mala*).

3. *Ilaj bil yad* (Surgery) : Unani physicians were pioneers in surgery and had developed their own instruments and techniques. The practiced surgery and wrote many remarkable books on the subject like, *Kitab-al-Tasreef* by *Abul Qasim Zahravi*, *Kitab-al-Umda fil Jarahat* by *Ibn-al-Quf Masihi*, *Kamilus San'a* by *Ali Abbas Majoosi* etc.

Surgery in *Ayurveda* : *Sushruta*, often hailed as the “Father of Surgery” in the *Ayurvedic* branch *Śalyatantra*, authored the *Sushruta Samhita* around the 6th century BCE, presenting an astonishingly advanced surgical system. He classified operations into eight categories—excision, incision, scraping, puncturing, probing, extraction, fluid drainage, and suturing—based on extensive practice using cadavers, gourds, and animal bladders. Over 300 procedures are described, including plastic and reconstructive techniques like forehead-flap rhinoplasty, cataract couching with a curved needle, lithotomy for bladder stones, caesarean delivery, fracture and dislocation management, and even craniotomy. He detailed the use of over 120 instruments, pre-, intra-, and postoperative care, anesthesia via wine and henbane, and principles of wound healing, hemostasis, and anatomical instruction—laying a foundation that resonates in modern surgical pedagogy and practice.

Discussion and conclusion :

The ancient systems of *Ayurveda* and *Unani* medicine, though originating from distinct cultures—India and Greece respectively—share a remarkable philosophical and structural similarity. Both systems emphasize a holistic approach to health, focusing on the balance of elemental and physiological principles within the body. The comparative analysis reveals that core concepts such as elements (*Arkan* and *Pancha Mahabhoot*), humours (*Akhlat* and *Dosha*), and functional faculties (*Afaal* and *Kriya*) are conceptually aligned, despite linguistic and cultural differences. This convergence suggests a historical exchange of knowledge among civilizations and highlights the universality of traditional healing wisdom.

In conclusion, by studying and integrating the principles of *Ayurveda* and *Unani*, we can foster a more inclusive and diversified approach to health and well-being. This comparative understanding can pave the way for collaborative research, evidence-based practice, and the global recognition of traditional systems of medicine as viable components of modern healthcare frameworks. By understanding and harmonizing the principles of both *Ayurveda* and *Unani*, we open pathways to more inclusive, culturally rich, and patient-centered medical practices.

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