

Research Article

Saadi: the Matter of Reality and Imagination

Mozhdeh Shafie¹ and Mahdi norouz²

¹Ph .D. Candidate, Persian Language and Literature,
Islamic Azad University, Nishapur, iran.

²Assistant Professor, Islamic Azad University, Nishapur, iran.

ABSTRACT

Is it true to say that Saadi was an idealized embodiment of his moral teachings in *Gulistan* and *Boustan*? The body of criticism on Saadi's works suggests that his biography provides no clear and valid information to judge about the extent to which Saadi acted what he preached. His moral teachings depict a sort of individual and social morality which is defined in relation to power and falls in the category of political ethics. Political ethics appear as for the noble and the subordinate in *Gulistan* and *Boustan*. Ethics for the noble include all his teachings for governors and rulers in eulogies. On the other hand, ethics for the subordinate include all his suggestions for the public in relation to power position. Here, Saadi puts forward some conservative recommendations that trigger some contemporary critical commentaries. However, there are some cases where he takes up a third person narrative position to narrate the story of a king and a mendicant. In these stories, the mendicant is a witty man with bitter criticism on society, implying that one should relinquish earthly pleasures and advantages if he wants his criticism to be acceptable. First person narratives fall in two categories determinate and indeterminate narratives. Indirect speeches reflecting biographical facts are indeterminate narratives which give no information about the poet's personality. Other narratives are more of an autobiography that report probable observations. These latter narratives demonstrate Saadi as a man quick at repartee that feels free to disclose his poverty and some cases of impiety. Therefore, they provide no idealized picture of the poet in terms of ethical principles.

Keywords: Saadi, ethics, *Boustan*, *Gulistan*, first-person narrative.

INTRODUCTION

The present study employs a broad range of resources to conduct a comparative analysis of different manifestations of Saadi. However, it doesn't mean that all these resources are of equal importance since some have no sound scientific basis, while some other neglect literary features of his works. Nevertheless, the random use of these resources provides for a perspective on critical ideas for and against Saadi. The study looks at the matter from three aspects: first, the poet's biography is examined to see how he acts what he preaches. Second, the poet's general

attitude on ethics is evaluated. Finally, the way Saadi portrays his own picture in *Gulistan* and *Boustan* as an idealized embodiment of his own teachings is inspected.

Inadequate representation of the poet in his biography

There is a general agreement that our knowledge of biographical information on past poets and philosophers is inadequate and, sometimes, mixed with unbelievable tales and myths or excessive exaggerations. Some of these eccentric and inept reports about poets have seemingly

been true but have been overdressed by personal fantasies and desires of their ardent followers. As Ian Ripka puts it, unfortunately, no more than some certain facts and dates are known about Saadi's life which are significantly less than what his biographies yield. However, his biographies mostly rely on the poet's own works, particularly *Gulistan* and *Boustan*. Although an author's works can't fully represent biographical peculiarities, the relationship between a literary work and the author's personal life is an essential issue in literary criticism. It should be borne in mind that biographies of many classic Persian writers have been largely dependent upon their own works. On the other hand, evaluating personal life of classic authors is more challenging than that of contemporary ones. Lack of enough information about classic poets is due to inadequate representation of them in classic tradition and culture (Movahhed, 1995:60). Nevertheless, some critics believe that Saadi's deeds were in line with his words and he was not one to urge people to do something he himself didn't do (Davari, 2009:60).

In spite of all these uncertainties and a great deal of stories which seem to be unsearchable, two things are known for sure about Saadi: his Asharite predispositions (which has triggered harsh attacks on him) and his love of Imam Ali and his family while sticking to Sunni tradition.

Saadi's ethics

The poet's ethics have given rise to a great deal of exaggerated admirations and oppositions. However, the present study seeks to avoid any sentimental judgment and provides an in-depth analysis of his ethics. Ralph Emerson rightly asserts that Saadi speaks the language of all people and his writing is always fresh as those of Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes and Montaigne. Emerson compares *Gulistan* to Bible and believes that it contains ethical directions for all people in international arena. Thus, neither this excessive ardent adoration, nor radical disapprobation is desirable for any unbiased

criticism. It is noteworthy that Saadi and many classic poets advocated didacticism not as a personal style, but rather as an accepted pattern in literature. As Movahhed puts it, admonition and giving advice have been an inseparable part of literature not only in Iran, but in many great literatures in the world (1995: 67). *Adāb al-'Arab wa-al-Furs* by Ibn-Moskooye is a pioneer work in Islamic ethical literature and relies mostly on an old Persian work entitled *Eternal Wisdom*. Although Saadi is not the first preacher in Persian literature, *Gulistan* and *Boustan* seem to have enduring effects on moral teachings in society. Adam Olearius, the 17th century German explorer, was impressed by didactic perspective of *Gulistan* and popularity of Saadi's poems among people and, by the help of an elderly Iranian, translated the book to Germany. Some critics admire the poet for his sincere teachings and conformity of his ideas with Islamic doctrine. He presents earthly, absolute and general ideas for his readers. As Zarrinkoub stresses, "what differentiates Saadi from hypocrites, liars and cynics is his straightforward representation of facts. He prefers the sin of love to that of lying and hypocrisy." (2004: 87) One controversial notion in his work is a line which signifies that a white lie is favored upon a seditious fact. This implies the poet's practical ethics and has provoked abundance of criticisms and reactions. The idea is given at the end of a story in *Gulistan* where a king orders a prisoner to put to death. In desperation, the prisoner curses the king, but the minister translates his words to a Quarnic verse as "Those who bridle their anger and forgive men; for Allah loveth the beneficent." The king forgives the prisoner. In the meantime, another minister informs the king of the first minister's false translation, but the king refutes him saying that the first minister's lying was based on a good intention while the second said the truth out of jealousy and vice. "Now, we need to see what the king should have done from the viewpoint of a modern man?"

Either to accept the second minister's idea on false deed of the first minister, or to kill him for his false lie? However, it would be the same in practice. The first minister had to tell the truth about the prisoner, otherwise, the second one would disclose the fact and both the first minister and the prisoner would have been killed. In this sense, Saadi seeks to present two things: first, there should always be a reserved for the rival to escape in any battle; second, anger should not intervene in decisions. This doesn't seem to be irrational in modern and postmodern era (Katouzian, 2002: 279-280). Recently, critics have found a tinge of misanthropic tendency in his writings that reflect ethical paradox. Ripka (2004) believes that the key to success in *Gulistan* after so many years is his attempts at reflecting epicurism and the philosophy of compatibility. His easy-to-grasp moral teachings, flexible skepticism, disinterestedness in materialism and ownership never imply his piety or philanthropism. This implies that though Saadi is considered to be an ethical pragmatist, he is not a moralist in the modern sense of the word and his writings are expected to bear some paradoxes. "It is highly expected that Saadi excel in philosophical and moral theorizing as professionally as he does in poetry, but this is as unreasonable as to expect philosophers and moralists to be great poets" (Movahhed, 1995: 15). In addition, his excessive optimism has been another source of criticism in recent years, while his Asharite attitude on human nature is interfered as a kind of racial discrimination against non-Muslims.

Saadi has always been accused of some occasional inconsistencies in his works. The present study seeks to classify his works to exonerate him of all these criticisms. Nevertheless, some critics have tried to attribute sort of realism to the poet. Davari (2009) stresses the fact that, "many have charged Saadi of presenting paradoxical ideas, neglecting the fact that he discloses human mental vicissitudes and

this can't be anything other than realism and realistic ideology. The poet doesn't entertain us with pleasing desires incompatible with reality of life; Rather, he tries to stay with us in time of distress and show the best way possible." Similarly, the poet assumes a moderate and earthly attitude in moral dealing with the matter of love and his ideal beloved is not confined to earthly desires. Ripka (2004) describes the essence of Saadi's moral attitude when he says, "He doesn't have an abstract mystic thought and only sticks to moral principles in his life." Rahmani et al. (2010) classified these attempts at identifying paradoxical aspects of Saadi's teachings in *Gulistan* and *Boustan* and found a direct and linear relationship between his ideas in the two books. The authors claim that Saadi projects his personal attitudes toward problems and his works are direct representatives of his feelings, wishes and perspectives. Moreover, any inconsistency in *Gulistan* and *Boustan* may arise from the poet's contradictory aspects of his mindset. Accordingly, his books appear as separate islands that constitute an incompatible totality.

Saadi's perspective on the relationship between moral speech and practice may be understood better in regard to Sanaei. Sanaei rebukes a learned man who doesn't act out what he teaches to others and believes that such a man can awaken no negligent soul. On the contrary, Saadi asserts that one should always listen to what learned men say, even if they don't put to practice their own words.

He said: 'Listen with thy soul's ear to a scholar
Although his actions may not be like his
doctrines.'

In vain does the gainsayer ask:

'How can a sleeper awaken a sleeper?

A man must receive into his ears.

The advice although it be written on a wall.'

Therefore, it is inferred from Saadi's stand here that a scholar or moralist may believe in, yet sometimes, trespass truth. This is a pragmatic

understanding of ethics. These practical features of Saadi's ethics have always been drawn upon in different literary and applied fields, such as dealing with prisoners (Mahammadpour, 2002: 38), naturalistic ethics based on personality traits (MirHasehmi, 2005: 113-128), guidelines for life and social ethics (Fatehizadeh et al., 2012: 11-138), ethics in education, particularly for children (Hassani Jalilian & Sahraei, 2012: 169-196) and ethics on dealing with delinquent children (Nasiri Nikou, 1999: 34-40).

In general, it can be said that Saadi was a pragmatist and realist who deals less with absolute good and evil and idealism and more with real aspects of life, particularly communicative part of it. Davari (2009) reminds us that *Boustan*, known as Saad's utopia, is a realistic (rather than imaginative) book, featured by justice and lawfulness. Accordingly, we can see why many contemporary scholars and poets criticize Saadi. "In Saadi's words, the world is created based on rules which one needs to identify and comply with to have a perfect life. That is to say, one should comprehend the situation to strive for a better life and save energy. So, one needs to find the current in order to avoid swimming against the tide" (Davari, 2009).

In the realm of political ethics, Saadi's poetry can be studied in two classes: first, eulogies coupled with advice for kings and rulers (ethics for the noble); second, advice and propositions for people on political manner (ethics for the subordinate). The poet first complains about injustice and changes in the world and invites the ruler to establish justice and protect the oppressed against oppressors. Then, he explains his own wealth and contentment to drive his eulogy to his desired end. Saadi usually doesn't name any king in power to provide a general theme in his works. If the king eats one apple from the garden of a subject His slaves will pull him up the tree from the roots. For five eggs which the sultan allows to be taken by force The

people belonging to his army will put a thousand fowls on the spit.

Iskandur Rumi, having been asked how he had conquered the east and the west, considering that the treasures, territories, reigns and armies of former kings exceeded his own and they had not gained such a victory, replied: 'Whatever country I conquered by the aid of God the most high, I abstained from distressing its population and spoke nothing but good of the king.'

A padshah who allows his subjects to be oppressed Will in his day of calamity become a violent foe. Be at peace with subjects and sit safe from attacks of foes Because his subjects are the army of a just shahanshah.

In his political ethics for the noble, Saadi points to some ethical values such as justice, avoiding tyranny, catering for people's demands, picking qualified officials, and applying reward and punishment system (see more at Zabihniya & Sangaki, 2012: 197-236). However, in ethics for the subordinate, along with his suggestion for establishing justice, fellowship and tolerance, the poet invites people to obey their ruler (see Mazaheri, 2008: 10-17 for civil rights in Saadi's works). This conservative attitude in his public teachings is what contemporaries find dissatisfactory.

The narrative in *Gulistan* utilizes a special composition of different characters, apart from Saadi's first-person narrator presence. Rahmani et al. (2010) report that, "Saadi embeds ethical principles in individual losses to convince readers to eschew/pursue what he preaches. Similarly, he expresses his admiration for the lofty position of the king to instigate his advice. Thus, the narrative in *Gulistan* addresses three classes of people: chapter one for kings, chapters two to four for dervishes and the public." Additionally, conversational aspect of his poems makes prominent the communicative aspect of his work (Qobadi & Sadeqi, 2010:51-74).

As regards ruling and moral decrees in *Gulistan* and *Boustan*, it is worth mentioning that the poet

tends to report everyday life events more frequently in *Gulistan*. Maybe that is why *Boustan* is called his utopia and is not rich with political ethics. *Gulistan* deals with the reality of life and represents the poet's desired ethical notions. Hassanli (2011) believes that *Gulistan* fully reflects social and cultural atmosphere of the time and represents typical moods and habits of people. The world depicted in *Gulistan* is real and accessible, not an ideal and imaginary and people appear in different forms: king, dervish, minister, judge, instructor, fighter, etc. In *Gulistan*, vice and virtue are portrayed along with each other. On the contrary, "Saadi's wishes find their way in *Boustan* and make up the poet's utopia" (Yousefi, 1971: 406). Therefore, Saadi masterfully "explains human ideal life in *Boustan* and creates a timeless work. He lays hand on important issues necessary for building a perfect world which is desired by all people in all times: true understanding of God and thankfulness, wisdom, true ruling, catering for people's rights, friendship, good deeds, modesty, devotion, propitiation kindness, piety, etc" (Hassanli 2011: 20).

Self-portrayal in *Gulistan* and *Boustan*

Evaluating the picture Saadi renders of himself in his works is on way for examining his ethics. However, it should be mentioned that this picture is not perfect and is only a partial representation of the poet. This uncertainty has made some critics to claim, "Saadi is uncomplicated and straightforward in terms of words, but turns confusing and erratic in when it comes to soul: he seems to be a pious noble-minded yet a fanatic man of narrow outlook; a true humanitarian versed in law that sets over against any opposition; a socialist and politician that advocates social health but justifies tyranny; a virtuous sage that reprimands and admonishes rulers to reveal the way to succeed, yet sometimes turns to a crowd-puller and introduces vulgar issues as philosophical principles"

(Dashti, 361). Stories in *Gulistan* and *Boustan* in which Saadi appears to narrate about himself are in two groups. 1) first-person narrative that can represent any narrator and is used as a technique in any story. 2) Stories that are mostly likely to be a representation of the poet himself. Ripka (2004) asserts that *Gulistan* and *Boustan* were written in literary level of meaning and what the author writes about himself shall not be taken as true. The stories may seemingly reflect autobiographical elements but seem a little far-fetched. On the other hand, Emdad believes that "all first-person narratives should not taken serious since they are written to strengthen the text not based on true historical events, since Saadi was not a historian and used these stories as a medium to criticize dark aspects of society" (Emdad, 1998: 35). Also, some critics accuse the poet of mendacity and deny his trips out of his hometown, Shiraz. However, vainglorious narrative has been a classic feature in Persian literature that reflects the poet's personality. Stories in *Gulistan* and *Boustan* have been interpreted differently. Some believe that "*Gulistan* lacks any substantial and integrated thought and the poet seeks to initiate no certain doctrine. His moral advice is not ideal and it seems that Saadi only depicts practical way of salvation in his own time" (Matini, 1971). Others introduce Saadi as a humanist. "Saadi's doctrine on man is a sort of humanism that appeared 500 years later in western philosophy and has maxims can be considered as tips on humanism. In pursuit of truth, man needs to abandon his pre-established ideas and reach knowledge and perfection" (Yektaei, 1971). The problem, nevertheless, as Katousian puts is, is that "Saadi narrates some stories that experienced firsthand. Introduction of new schools of literary criticism in recent years gave rise to some doubts about the truth behind these stories, particularly in case of some mismatched dates." One such unsolvable inconsistency of story and the poet's life in *Gulistan* is the story of Muhammad Khovarezm

Shah. Also, binary opposition is abundant in *Gulistan*, but not in *Boustan*, reflecting argumentative nature of subjective as against objective life in the former. For example, corruption & goodness: "I complained to one of the sheikhs that a certain man had falsely accused me of lasciviousness. He replied: 'Put him to shame by thy good conduct.'"; visiting and granting: "I excused him from making me a present when I saw his face."; good & bad: "I said to a friend that I have chosen rather to be silent than to speak because on most occasions good and bad words are scattered concurrently but enemies perceive only the latter. He replied: 'That enemy is the greatest who does not see any good.'".

Now, we turn to examine "I" in the first-person narrative in *Gulistan*, wherein Saadi presents most of his moral notions, to identify the picture the poet depicts of himself. Although it is said that classic poets abandoned their self in favor of public and common culture, in evaluating the poet's self-portrayal we employ it as a technique to provide an unbiased analysis and a general schematic description of the poet. The use of "I" in *Gulistan* and *Boustan* is considered in terms of determination and indetermination. Salehi (2010) defines determination as when the identities of agent, actor and undergoer in the story are clear. In fact, determination contributes to identifying the narrative agent through nomenclature. On the other hand, indetermination is when the identity of the narrative agent remains unrecognized. Indetermination is a result of ambiguity and use of indefinite pronouns or articles such as everyone, some, those, a, and one. Since we study first-person determination and indetermination, we categorize stories starting with "I have heard" in the framework of indetermination and discard them, while examining the others in the light of determination.

Contention of Saadi with a disputant concerning wealth and poverty is an issue of interest that the

narrator is closest to the poet. Here, the poet appears less as an Aharite and takes the side of wealthy people against the disputant as if "he represents that group, while the two parties speak up against the other" (Davari, 2009: 61). The story is the only one in *Gulistan* and *Boustan* where the name of the poet is clearly given and the first-person narrator is closely associated with him.

A total number of 48 stories (26.66%) were narrated from first-person point of view, constituting a quarter of all stories. This may not amount to anything in the modern narrative, but may seem considerably initiative when we notice that Persian literature has exclusively used third-person omniscient point of view in verse and prose. Rezaei & Jahedjah (2012) summarize frequency of first-person narrative in *Gulistan* as follows: chapter 1: 4 stories out of total number of 41 (9.75%); chapter 2: 13 stories out of total number of 47 (27.66%); chapter 3: 5 stories out of total number of 26 (17.85%); chapter 4: 2 stories out of total number of 14 (14.28%); chapter 5: 8 stories out of total number of 21 (38.09%); chapter 6: 5 stories out of total number of 9 (55.55%); chapter 7: 10 stories out of total number of 19 (52.63%). In case we hold that first-person narratives indicate Saadi's personal experience, "it seems that the poet has had great experiences in matters of education, weakness and senility" (Rezaei & Jahedjah, 2012: 116). However, it is far from acceptable and doesn't mean that these stories reflect personal experiences since there are some cases that cast doubts on it. Therefore, we resort to any representation of the poet in first-person narratives that comprises 48 narratives

These autobiographical stories imply that Saadi prefers personal experience over pre-established principles and seeks to convey the fact that firsthand experimentation with real life, as compared to relying on contextual teachings, yields greater ethical implications. First-person narratives, despite literal form and use of literary

terms direct the reader outside the text in a form of externalism and indicate realism of the poet. To find out to what extent the poet acted according to his own teaching, we should have on mind that his teachings are nothing more than small and big problems of life. In addition, some stories are blurred with ambiguities and make it hard to claim that the poet's response to a disputant is true or to ward off an evil. However, it implies Saadi's effort at filling the gap between reality and ethical dogma with language. This is true for both *Gulistan* and *Boustan*, though the latter is less autobiographical. Rezaei & Jahedjah (2012) conclude that Saadi's autobiographical writings were initiative and admirable since it is employed in communities where social patterns determine subjectivity and the poet exhibits his personality and richness of thought.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of Saadi's works reveals that autobiographical information in *Gulistan* and *Boustan* can't sufficiently determine whether the poet matches with the ethical picture he portrays of himself in his works? His ethical approach includes both individual and social levels and is somehow political. Political ethics appear as for the noble and the subordinate in *Gulistan* and *Boustan*. Ethics for the noble include all his teachings for governors and rulers in eulogies. On the other hand, ethics for the subordinate include all his suggestions for the public in relation to power position. Here, Saadi puts forward some conservative recommendations that trigger some contemporary critical commentaries. However, there are some cases where he takes up a third person narrative position to narrate the story of a king and a mendicant. In these stories, the mendicant is a witty man with bitter criticism on society, implying that one should relinquish earthly pleasures and advantages if he wants his criticism to be acceptable. First person narratives fall in two categories determinate and

indeterminate narratives. Indirect speeches reflecting biographical facts are indeterminate narratives which give no information about the poet's personality. Other narratives are more of an autobiography that report probable observations. These latter narratives demonstrate Saadi as a man quick at repartee that feels free to disclose his poverty and some cases of impiety. Therefore, they provide no idealized picture of the poet in terms of ethical principles.

REFERENCES

1. Abdollahi, M. (2006). Narrative Techniques in *Gulistan*. *Journal of Humanities and Human Sciences of Shiraz University*: 48.
2. Akhavan Sales, M. (2011). *Parody and Parodying*. Tehran: Zemestan Publishing.
3. Azadi, M. (1994). *Education in Saadi's Works*. Tehran: Rahgosha Publishing.
4. Dashti, M. (1971). *The Realm of Saadi*. Tehran: Amirkabir Publishing.
5. Davari, P. (2009). Realistic Ideas in Saadi's Works. *Pajouheshnameye Zaban va Adabiyat Farsi*: 3.
6. Emdad, H. (1998). *Saadi and Disputants*. Shiraz: Navid Shiraz Publishing.
7. Faqih, N., Ferdousi, M. (2012). Governance in *Gulistan*. *Olum Siasy*: 27.
8. Hassani Jalilian, M., Sahraei, Q. (2011). Indirect Teaching. *Iadabiuyat Taalimi*: 13.
9. Katouzian, M. (2000). Saadi's Contentions. *Iranshenasi*: 47.
10. Katouzian, M. (2001). Saadi: The School Escape. *Iranshenasi*: 49.
11. Katouzian, M. (2001). Saadi: Depression in *Gulistan*. *Iranshenasi*: 50.
12. Katouzian, M. (2002). Saadi's White Lie. *Iranshenasi*: 54.
13. Katouzian, M. (2002). Roots of Executing Saadi. *Iranshenasi*: 55.
14. Khoei, E. (1971). *Contention with a Disputant*. Tehran: Javidan Publishing.
15. Mazahery, N. (2008). Civil Rights in Saadi's Works. *Kanoun*: 15.

16. Mirhashemi, M. (2005). Introvert and Extrovert Characters in Hafez and Saadi. *Danesh va Pajouhesh dar Olum Tarbiaty*: 5-6.
17. Milani, A. (1999). Saadi and Kings. *Iranshenasi*: 42.
18. Momtahn, M. (2012). Looking into Reward and Punishment System in Saadi's Works. *Adabiyat Taalimi*: 15.
19. Movahhed, Z. (1995). *Saadi*. Tehran: TarhNo Publishing
20. Naraghi, E. (2000). Justice and Moderation in Saadi's Thought. *Bokhara*: 11.
21. Nasiri Nikou, A. (1999). Saadi and Education. *Eslah va Tarbiat*: 52.
22. Pourpirar, N. (1997). *These Five Days*. Tehran: Karang Publishing.
23. Qobadi, H., Sadqi, M. (2010). The Logic of Dialogue in *Gulistan* and *Boustan*. *Pajouheshnameye Zaban va Adabiyat Farsi*: 6.
24. Rahmani, F., et al. (2010). Psychoanalytic Reading of Saadi's Works. *Boustan Adab*: 2.
25. Rezaei, L., Jahedjah, A. (2012). First-person Narrative in *Gulistan*. *Pajouheshnameye Zaban va Adabiyat Farsi*: 2.
26. Ripka, Y. (2004). *A Survey of Persian Literature*. translated by Seeri, A. Tehran: Sokhan Publishing.
27. Saadi, M. (2006). *Gulistan and Boustan*. Tehran: Hermes Publishing.
28. Yousefi, Q. (1971). Saadi's Utopia. In *Saadi's Life and Thought*, edited by Rastagr, M. (1971). Shiraz University.
29. Zarrinkoub, A. (2004). *About Saadi's Life and Thought*. Tehran: Sokhan Publishing.