

The Impact of Sa'di Shirazi on Ralph Waldo Emerson's Poetry: A Moral and Religious Orientation

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Abstract

During the early decades of the American history , its poets sought to build their new culture on moral , philosophical , and religious ground by their creative imitation of the representative literary , scientific , and religious figures of the old world . The Iranian poet , Sa'di Shirazi is one of these figures who influenced Ralph Waldo Emerson's poetry deeply , making his poems of a rather moral , religious , and mystical nature , and showing clearly the impact of the Islamic East on the American culture during this part on the American culture this part of its history .

(I)

In his A Return to Moral and Religious Philosophy in Early America , Rem B. Edwards investigates the similitude between the 19th-century American poet, moralist, and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and other famous world literary figures. This investigation is built on the ground that Emerson, claims Edwards, "repeatedly asserted the ultimate unity of all persons with one another and with God".² In his essay, "The American Scholar", Emerson suggests that we are able to understand the great books of the past because we somehow wrote those books: "one nature wrote and one reads".³ He continuously advocates his doctrine of "the identity of all minds"; such as, in his essay, "History", in which he gives a highly Hegelian account of the unity of all minds. According to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), there exists "a real, not merely apparent, pluralism of persons, who are parts of a more inclusive whole"⁴. Emerson calls it "The Over Soul", which means that everything is seen as existing in God, and there is one mind common to all individual men. Every man, holds Emerson, is an inlet to the same and to all of the same nature.⁵ For him, God is the whole of reality of which we are real parts and there is a universal human nature which makes us all one. This genuine Emersonian theory legitimates a study of the great impact of Shaikh Sa'di Shirazi, the outstanding Persian ethical poet and writer of the 7th-century Hijri (solar calendar), on Emerson. The impact of Sa'di on Emerson is not only reflected on his poem, which is entitled with the name of the great Persian poet. Rather Sa'di, as will be seen, enlightens most of Emerson's writings tremendously.

Emerson was first introduced to Sa'di by Francis Gladwin's first American translation of Sa'di's Golestan (Rose Garden).⁶ Gladwin asks Emerson to write a preface for this translation, in which the latter eulogizes Sa'di in the following words:

Sa'di has wit, practical sense and just moral sentiments. He has the instinct to teach, and from every occurrence must draw the moral, like Franklin. He is the poet of friendship, love, devotion and serenity. ...He inspires in the reader a great hope.... He asserts the universality of moral laws, and the perpetual retributions. He celebrates the omnipotence of a virtuous soul. A certain intimate and avowed piety is habitual to him. All the forms of courtesy and of business in daily life take a religious tinge, as did those of Europe in the Middle Ages.⁷

Through his interest in Sa'di, Emerson discovers, as he says: "new landscape, new costume, new religion, new manners, under which humanity nestles very comfortably in Shiraz and Mecca, with good appetite, and with moral and intellectual results that correspond point for point with ours at New York and London".⁸ Thus, the Persian local forms and dialect are expanded by Emerson into a cosmopolitan breadth.

(II)

Sa'di was born in 1184 or 1185 in Shiraz. He hailed from a family of clerics and was orphaned at an early age. After receiving his early education in Shiraz, he went to Baghdad and there studied at the Nezamieh Academy and other reputable institutes of higher learning. Thereafter, for thirty years, he wandered hither and thither in the lands of Islam, from India to Syria and Hejaz. He traveled in true dervish-fashion in all sorts of ways, and mixed with all sorts of people.⁹

He returned to Shiraz towards the end of the reign of Abu Bakr ibn Sa'd ibn Zangi (623-685) and made quick strides in winning his patronage. He also enjoyed great favour with Sa'd, the son of the ruler, from whose name he derived his nom de plume Sa'di, which means a fortunate man.¹⁰ The Boostan is his first dated composition and was completed and presented to Abu Bakr ibn Sa'd in 1257. The book presents excellent didactic poems of mystical-ethical lore. Many verses from the Boostan have achieved the status of proverbs, the surest proof of the poet's epigrammatic brilliance. The interweaving of wisdom with appropriate anecdote is done with great skill.¹¹ Thus, Emerson calls Sa'di "joy-giver and enjoyer", "the cheerer of men's hearts", and both poets appreciate humour as an essential part of their poetry.

Sa'di foreshadows himself as a master at telling simple stories, and in his stories he includes numerous incidents from his own adventurous life. He wrote his Golestan in 1258.¹² The eight sections of the book are entitled as: Morals of the Kings; Morals of Dervishes; Contentment; Advantages of Silence; Love; Imbecility and Old Age; Effects of Education; and Rules of Conduct in Life. According to Amal Ebraheem, the eight partitions into which the book is divided adhere to the eight doors of Paradise in Islamic beliefs.¹³ The poet compares his Golestan with a rose garden, planted with its own cluster of gay and somber stories, in the deductive intermixture of poetry and prose of elegant composition. Like Sa'di, Emerson masters both poetry and prose, using them both to serve his moral intentions.

(III)

Emerson says that the morality of the Golestan is pure.¹⁴ In this book, Sa'di respects the poor, and the kings who befriend the poor. He admires the royal eminence of the dervish or the religious ascetic. The reason of composing his Golestan, narrates Sa'di, is that one day he was contemplating in an isolated place where an old fellow came and told him that seclusion is of no use for one like Sa'di who is well known for his preaching and didacticism. Sa'di could not resist the temptation, he went out with his friend into a rose garden (Golestan) where the poet says:

**Of what use is a tray of flowers to you? Carry a leaf from my Golestan
(Rose Garden). Flowers last only for five days or six, whereas this
Golestan will always provide joy.**

(TWOS, P.3)¹⁵

He puns here on the word (:warak): leaves of book and leaves of flowers to distinguish the short life of flowers from the immortality of Sa'di's poetry. With these words Sa'di starts his immortal book, which is of a great use to the common people as well as poets, especially Emerson who imitates the style and revives the intentions of the great Persian poet who says:

**Our intention was to advice, and we have done so. We have entrusted
you to God's care, and departed.**

(TWOS, P.5)

Sa'di acknowledges his functioning as a preacher and prophet in his writings:

**We have offered our advice in its propriety and spent a lifetime in
doing so. A messenger is only obliged to convey the message, even if it
is not carefully heeded by those advised.**

(TWOS, P.6)

Emerson derives from Sa'di his concept of the poet as a messenger or a prophet with a divine mission, his duty is to advice people and teach them the ways of religion and morality. He is a linkage between God and his creatures; inspired by God to save humanity from dark ignorance. The American sage describes the poet saying:

**A Moody child and wildly wise
Pursued the game with joyful eyes,
Which chose, like meteors, their way,
And rived the dark with private ray:
They overleap the horizon's edge,
Searched with Apollo's privilege;
Through man, and woman, and sea, and star
Saw the dance of nature forward far;
Through worlds, and races, and terms, and times
Saw musical order, and pairing rhymes.
Olympian bards who sung
Divine ideas below,
Which always find us young,
And always keep us so.**

(1-14)

Although Emerson's poet is the incarnation of the romantic, orphic, bardic traditions, he is the opposite of Goethe's Faustus and Coleridge's poet in "Kubla Khan". He is not the product of the ivory tower, rather he is the dweller of Tennyson's cottage in "The Palace of Art". This poet is very democratic, a representative of the common people and speaks for their own well-faire. He advises self-reliance, idealism, optimism, and transcendentalism. Like Sa'di, he is secluded as a Dervish in a background of nature not the city, and the recompensation of his seclusion is divine inspiration. He is a mystic who speaks as a natural man a simple language and simple style. So he imitates Wordsworth in appreciating the naïve subjects as in "the Rhodora", and "The Humble Bee", for example. In these poems Emerson follows the steps of Sa'di, finding religious meaning and teaching morality behind the simple elements of nature, which links the poet in almost a mystical relationship with God, the greatest Creator. He says in "The Rhodora":

**Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew;
But in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me there brought you.**

(13-16)

Emerson argues for a rebirth of an intellectual and artistic beauty that is inextricably bound with the life of the spirit, or he revives transcendentalism, which dominated the thought

of the American Renaissance. It means that, communing with nature, through work and art, man can transcend his senses and gain an understanding of beauty, goodness and truth.¹⁶ Emerson expounds his mystical views on the harmonies of man and nature, the essential perfectibility of human spirit, the unity of human soul with the Over-Soul, the intellectual and spiritual self-reliance, and Utopian friendship.¹⁷

The roots of Emerson's transcendental philosophy runs deep into Sa'di's writings in which he builds life on spiritual rather than material basis, saying

**The avarice eye of a materialist can either be satisfied by contentment
or filled by the dust of the grave.**

(TWOS, P.12)

He adopts the Islamic belief that this life is only an introduction into another immortal life after death. Whatever man does, good or evil, right or wrong, in this world, he will find its reward in the world Hereafter. So, Sa'di claims:

**Since the good and the bad have both to die, happy is he who has been
charitable. Make provisions for life Hereafter, since nobody will send
it for you after your death. Send it in advance.**

(TWOS, P.20)

Sa'di refers here to one of the basic tenets of Islam, which is Zakat, or the prescribed poor-dues. It consist of the payment of a portion of one's property for the cause of God to help the orphans, poor people, the penurious whose conditions are worse than a poor person, debtors who cannot pay their debts, wayfarers who cannot afford to return their own homeland, and to liberate slaves and bond persons.¹⁸ The payment of Zakat aims at deleting the material and social discrepancy between people. Property should re-divided, according to Islam, in order to achieve justice. Thus, Islam is considered as one of the religious institutions, which call to equality and democracy. For Sa'di, the very devoted Muslim poet, there is no difference between the rich and the poor: "If anyone opens a grave", says Sa'di, "he will find that there is nothing to distinguish the rich from the poor".¹⁹ This coincides with Emerson's saying: "Ah! If the rich were rich as the poor fancy riches".²⁰ When he moralizes the kings, Sa'di makes no difference between the king and the common man. On the contrary, commoners are sometimes more favorable than kings because the formers can make themselves useful in every place and every time.

**If a cobbler travels to another place, he suffer no hardship and
affliction. But if the king of Neemrooz²¹ were to wander out of his
kingdom, he would have to sleep hungry.**

(TWOS, P.7)

The cobbler wins esteem over the king useful skills. The worth of man, for Sa'di, neither depends on property, nor on nobility. He refers to specific examples to prove his philosophy of equality:

**Since Can'an (the son of prophet Noah), was devoid of virtue, his
being a son of a prophet did not increase his worthiness. Display your
accomplishment, if you have any, and not your lineage, for a rose
come from thorns and Abraham comes from Azar.**

(TWOS, P.10)

(V)

Like Sa'di, Emerson was born to the clerical tradition. His father was pastor of the first Unitarian Church of Boston, and successor to a line of non-conformist and Puritan

clergymen.²² He was by 1829 in the pulpit of the second Unitarian Church of Boston. His Unitarian theology does not only result from the impact of his father, Sa'di's Moslem Unitarian teachings, but the impact of his meeting with the English philosopher, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) in Edinburgh where he preached in the Unitarian chapel. The Scotchman teaches the Yankee, claims Nathan Haskell Dole, "greater insight into religious truth".²³ He believes in the unity of life in the metaphysical absolute. He turns into a mystic preaching the immortality of the soul, and the unity of man and nature: "Nature is the incarnation of thought. The world is the mind precipitated". For him, nature is "a mute gospel". He has faith in intuition, saying in his "Self-Reliance":

**Whosoever would be a man, must be a nonconformist
A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds
To be great is to be misunderstood.
(18-20)**

He becomes a wise man, seer, prophet and sage, claiming in his mystical poem, "Brahma":

**Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear.
(5-7)**

The poem presents an apocalyptic moment in which Emerson communes with the Divine Providence in a mystical experience. This epiphany recalls Sa'di's saying:

**O You who are beyond imagination, comparison, presumption, and
apprehension; and whatever has been said, heard and read about
You! The assembly has concluded and life is about to end, and we are
still in the initial stages of Praising You.
(TWOS, P.200)**

Both poets call their readers to neglect their physical desires and vanish, in the mystical sense of the word, in the Infinite Presence of their Creator.²⁴

References

- ¹Unless elsewhere mentioned, all the quotations of Emerson's poetry are taken from Norman Foester (ed.), American Poetry and Prose (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957).
- ²Rem B. Edwards, A Return to Moral and Religious Philosophy in Early America (Washington: University Press of America, 1982), p.186.
- ³Ralph Waldo Emerson, Essays (n.p., Peter Paper, n.d.), p.301.
- ⁴Encyclopedia Britannica Updated 1994-2001, The Encyclopedia Britannica Inc.
- ⁵Emerson, p.86.
- ⁶Mohammed Kazem Kamran, Wisdom of Sa'di (London: Al-Hoda Publishers and distributors, 2003), p.ix.
- ⁷Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Preface" to Francis Gladwin's translation of the Golestan. URL:<http://www.CornelUniversityMakingofAmerica>. 20/10/2005.n.p.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Kamran, p.vii.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Ibid., p.viii.
- ¹²Ibid.

¹⁴Emerson's "Preface", n.p.

¹⁵Unless elsewhere mentioned, all Sadi's quotations are taken from Kamran's translation.

¹⁶Thomas Hampson, "The American Renaissance and Transcendentalism", from I Hear America Singing, URL:<http://www.Yahoo.com>. 20/10/2005. n.p.

¹⁷"Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)". URL:<http://www.PBS Online>. 20/10/2005. n.p.

¹⁸Muhammed Shirazi, What is Islam? Beliefs, Principles and a Way of Life (Kuwait: Fountain Books, 2002), p.17.

¹⁹Kamran, p.61.

²⁰Emerson's Essays, p.76.

²¹The king of Neerooz (ancient Sistan) is one of the titles of the great paladin Rostam of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh. From Kamran, p.7.

²²Sculley Bradley and etal., The American Tradition in Literature (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 1967),p.569.

²³Nathan Haskell Dole, "Introduction" to Early poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1899).URL:<http://www.Yahoo.com>.82/11/2005. n.p.

الخلاصة

خلال العهود المبكرة لأمريكا سعي شعرائها إلي صبغ ثقافة بلدهم الجديد بصبغة أخلاقية فلسفية دينية من خلال التقليد الخلاق لبعض رموز الأدب والعلم والدين في العالم القديم . ومن هؤلاء الرموز الشاعر الإيراني سعدي الشيرازي بعمق علي الشاعر المبكر رالف والدو امرسون صابغا شعره بصبغة أخلاقية دينية صوفية مبدية بوضوح تأثير الشرق الإسلامي علي الثقافة الأمريكية خلال تلك الحقبة التاريخية المهمة .