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**The Culture of Reconciliation.
The Moral Aspect of Speech in Sa‘di’s Teachings**

Abstract

The 13th-century Persian poet Sa‘di from Shiraz is considered to be one of the most prominent representatives of medieval Persian ethical literature. His works full of moralizing anecdotes were well known and widely read not only in Persia, but in the other parts of the Islamic world as well. Due to his highly humanistic approach, the relations between people were one of the most important issues discussed by the poet. This article is an attempt to define the status of ‘speech’ in Sa‘di’s moral imagination and to show how it becomes a key instrument in shaping relations with others. In the poet’s opinion, the right words reasonably spoken, just like an appropriate silence, shape the relationship between people and help them avoid conflict and open dispute. Quarrels and confrontations, according to the poet, not only damage a person literally by exposing his flaws and imperfections of character, thereby compromising his reputation (*aberu*), but may also undermine the basis of social life, generating hostility between people. That is why Sa‘di urges his readers to use soft and gentle speech in dealing with people and always behave in a conciliatory manner in response to aggression and rudeness. Highlighting the moral aspect of speech, Sa‘di shows how kind words form an invisible veil between people, which should be preserved if man desires to maintain his image, good name and dignity.

Keywords: Persian moral literature, Sa‘di, ethics, moral conduct, *adab*, *aberu*, *ta‘arof*, face, human relations, speech

In many cultures, the highest-ranking relation a human being was capable of entering into was his relationship with God. Yet in Antiquity the classical authors focused their attention on the essence of a meeting between two human beings. In European culture

a noteworthy case is that of Plato, to whom a meeting of conversation partners was a pretext for a joint quest for the Truth. Similarly, mystical currents, although focused on what binds man with the Creator, used the metaphor of humane love to express it. That is also the case with Persian Sufism that manifests itself *inter alia* in the poetical trope of *asheq* and *ma'shuq*, loving and beloved.

In the context of Perso-Islamic culture, a special interest in what arises between people and how relations between people should be shaped can be observed in the works belonging to the genre of medieval didactic literature, in Western scholarship referred to as 'adab literature'. Throughout the ages, the term *adab* had numerous meanings in Persian. It could denote proper conduct and good manners, politeness and courtesy, as well as appropriate behaviour in any field of activity, or in general knowledge of what is good and bad, right and wrong.¹ In the broadest sense, the term is used to denote literary tradition, or literature which was fully developed during Islamic era. Its identity however, as Fereshteh Davaran notices, was dual – both Iranian and Islamic at the same time.² The tradition was developed as a sum of still remembered ancient pre-Islamic Zoroastrian instructions preserved in advice treaties (*andarzname*) and the Islamic moral teachings of the *sunna* and the Quran. However, the Perso-Islamic *adab* tradition did not constitute a rigid set of works. Rather, its humanistic message could be found in many works of poetry and prose of different literary types – epical, mythical or lyrical – over several centuries.³ Its didactic content, instructions on correct behaviour, moral and practical advice were already present in the 10th-century national Iranian epic *Shahname* ("The Book of Kings") written by Ferdousi Tusi, as well as in the books of counsel for kings, the so-called 'mirrors for princes' written by Keykavus ibn Eskandar, Mohammad Ghazali, Nizam al-Mulk or, Faridoddin Attar's *Pandname* ("The Book of Advice"), and Abu Shakur Balkhi *Afarinname* ("The Book of Benediction"), as well as many other stories (*hekayat*), recited by Persian poets – all these texts follow Hamid Dabashi's definition of *adab* and could be classified as belonging to the Persian literary humanism tradition.⁴

In this search for an ideal model of personal and social conduct there is in Persia probably no greater master of didactic literature than medieval poet Abu Mohammad Moslehoddin b. Abdollah better known as Sa'di from Shiraz (1209–1291)⁵. This claim

¹ Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, *Adab*, in: *Loghatname-ye Dehkhoda*, Mohammad Moin, Ali Akbar Dehkhoda (eds.), Mo'assese-ye enteshar va chap-e daneshgah-e Tehran, Tehran 1372 Anno Persico, p. 43.

² Fereshteh Davaran, *Continuity in Iranian Identity Resilience of a Cultural Heritage*, Routledge, New York 2010, p. 6.

³ Ibidem, p. 171.

⁴ Cf. Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London 2012, p. 1 et seq.

⁵ Scholarly interest in Sa'di's poetry, both native and foreign goes back less than a hundred years. It resulted in the numerous works on the life and writings of the poet, primarily in Persian. His poetry was studied by Mohammad Ali Farughi who prepared an edition of the poet's works and wrote several articles on his life and teachings. Of the more prominent literary scholars who worked on Sa'di we can also mention Sa'id Nafisi (*Sokhanan-e Sa'di dar bare-ye khodesh*, Tehran 1316 AP) and Abdolhosein Zarrinkub (*Hadis-e khosh-e Sa'di*, Tehran, Sokhan 1379 AP). Western scholars who worked on Sa'di's poetry include Homa Katouzian (of Persian origin), the author

may be justified by quoting an already mentioned scholar of Persian culture and literature Hamid Dabashi, who once recalled the widespread belief that, “if something catastrophic were to happen, and the entire Persian literary culture were to disappear from the face of the earth, and all that remained was the text of Sa’di’s *Golestan*, that lost civility could be constructed anew.”⁶

Living in the 13th-century, Sa’di was active in the turbulent period of the decline and fall of the Salghurid atabaks of Fars and the Mongolian invasion in Iran. He was the author of anthologies of moralistic anecdotes which were and are still highly valued and widely read today, not only in Iran but in the other parts of Islamic world as well. He went down in the history of Persia not only as a poet, but also as a doctor of contemporary sciences, traveller and mystic. It is most probably the broadness of his experience that he owed his versatility; as Homa Katouzian rightly noted, “there are few aspects of life on which Sa’di does not speak.”⁷

In this particular study based on Sa’di’s works, I would like to look at him as a teacher of human relations, who deliberated on what happens between people during face to face encounters.⁸ Such an idea had occupied thinkers in many epochs. In 20th-century thought the same concern become central for thinkers representing the so-called philosophy of dialogue, or philosophy of meeting, a trend which strived to re-establish faith in human coexistence, improve human relations, after it had been badly damaged by the traumatic

of a monograph under the title *Sa’di, the Poet of Life, Love and Compassion* published in 2006 in London; John D. Yohannan who published a book entitled *The Poet Sa’di: a Persian Humanist* (University Press of America, 1987) and French orientalist Charles-Henri de Fouchecour, who elaborated on Sa’di in his famous *Moralia: les Notions Morales dans la Littérature Persane du 3e/9e au 7e/13e siècle*, Paris 1987. There are also several research articles in English language on the selected aspects of poet’s life and teachings, which however not related directly to the subject of this article, are worth mentioning e.g. Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Much Have I Roamed through the World: In Search of Sadi’s Self-Image*, “International Journal of Middle East Studies” Vol. 26, No. 3 (Aug., 1994), pp. 465–475; John Andrew Boyle, *The Chronology of Sa’di’s Years of Travel in: Islamwissenschaftliche Abhandlungen: Fritz Meier zum sechzigsten Geburtstag*, ed. R. Gramlich (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974), pp. 1–8; Hasan Nishat Ansari, *Did Shaykh Sa’di Visit India?* “Journal of the Bihar Research Society” 59 (1973), pp. 173–186; Ahmedmian Akhtar, *Sa’di’s Visit to Somnat*, “Islamic Culture” 8 (1934), pp. 212–221; Minoos Southgate, *Men, Women, and Boys: Love and Sex in the Works of Sa’di*, “Iranian Studies” 1984, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 413–452; and many other in Persian e.g. Charles-Henri de Fouchecour, *Shaykh Sa’di az didgah-e khod-e u in: Zekr-e Jamil-e Sa’di: Collected Articles and Poems for the Commemoration of the 800th Birth Anniversary of Sheikh Sa’di*, 3 vols. (Tehran: National Commission of Unesco in Iran and Ministry of Islamic Guidance, 1987), p. 131–141.

⁶ Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, p. 2.

⁷ Homa Katouzian, *Sa’di: The Poet of Life, Love and Compassion*, Oneworld Publications, Oxford 2006, p. 89.

⁸ The source material for this study are Sa’di’s two major works: *Golestan* (“The Rose Garden”) and *Bustan* (“The Orchard”) published in the Mosleh b. Abdollah Sa’di *Kolliyat-e Sa’di* (Collected Works of Sa’di) edited by Bahaoddin Khorramshahi, sixth edition, *Entesharat-e dustan*, Tehran 1389 AP. English translations of Sa’di’s works (if not stated otherwise) come from, respectively, Edward Rehatsek (*Golestan*) and G.M. Wickens (*Bustan*), both published by Hermes Publishers in Tehran in 2004. The Rehatsek and Wickens translations were chosen due to their faithfulness to the original text and their undisputed beauty. Footnotes referring to Persian text are recorded as Sa’di, *Golestan* or *Bustan*; and those referring to English translations as Sa’di, *Gulistan* or *Bustan*.

events of the 20th century. Sa'di would therefore probably agree with the protestant theologian Karl Barth, who over seven hundred years later wrote that "humanity is the fellowship of men. Where there is no fellowship there is inhumanity."⁹ And although Persian culture emphasises the significance of a solitary quest for excellence, and there are many ways in which man may grow towards perfection, reading Sa'di's poetry allows us to look at the encounter of two people as a lesson in humanity using speech and words as its tools.

I

Although Sa'di's moral imagination was, to a large degree built on the virtue of silence, I would like to argue that even though silence was a fundamental concept in Perso-Islamic ethics on the whole¹⁰, the highest status in the context of human relations, Sa'di grants to the concept of speech and proper utterance (*adab-e sokhan*, *adab-e sohbat*).¹¹

'Speech' is considered by Sa'di to be a gift from God.¹² The capability of making use of speech is similar to the possession of a soul: it is an attribute that distinguishes and, in fact, elevates humans above other beings. As Sa'di says:

به نطق آدمی بهتر است از دواب.¹³

By speech a human is better than a brute¹⁴.

⁹ Karl Barth, *The New Humanism*, p. 162 cited after Gary Deddo, *Karl Barth's Theology of Relations*, vol. I, Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene 2015, p. 99.

¹⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, p. 156. 'Silence' (*khamushi*) was an important ethical concept not only in Sa'di's writings, but substantially in the whole Perso-Islamic ethical tradition expressed in poetry and in theological and ethical tractates. Much attention had been given to the idea of silence by Moulana Jalaluddin Rumi, who even used the term *khamush* as his *takhallos* (pseudonymous). By many authors 'verbosity' was considered a sign of moral weakness and as 15th-century Persian theologian and jurist Jalaluddin Davani noticed it was a sign of humiliation (*Akhlaq-e jalali*, Abdollah Mas'udi Arani (ed.), Entesharat-e ettela'at, Tehran 1391 AP, p. 200). Refraining from speaking on the other hand was considered civil and polite. Nezami Ganjavi, a 12th-century Persian poet wrote on speech and the risk of its abuse (*Hezar andarz hakim nezami*, Vahid Dastgerdi (ed.), Tehran, Armaghan 1319 AP, pp. 6–14). According to a Safavid scholar, poet and philosopher Sheykh Bahai, another poet, 13th-century Amir Khosrou, had said that although speech is pleasant, silence is much better, especially in putting an end to a trouble or perturbation. He adds that he has seen many regretting uttered words but no one being sorry for not speaking and keeping silence. Sheykh Bahai, *Kashgul*, web library viewed 21 January 2017, <<http://www.nosokhan.com/library/Topic/1MQW>>.

¹¹ Two Iranian scholars also elaborated on the art of speech and dialogue in Sa'di's perspective. Cf. Hosein Ali Qobadi, Maryam Sadeqi, *Tabiin-e manteq-e goftogu az did-e Sa'di* (The Explanation of the Logic of Dialogue in Sa'di's View), "Pazhuheshname-ye zaban wa adabiyat-e farsi" 1389 AP, 2, No. 6 pp. 51–74.

¹² Mosleh b. Abdollah Sa'di, *Bustan in: Kollyyat-e Sa'di*, (ed.) Bahoddin Khorramshahi, 6th edition, Entesharat-e Dustan, Tehran 1383 AP, p. 185.

¹³ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 29.

¹⁴ Sheikh Musleh'iddin Sa'di, *Gulistan*, Edward Rehatsek (transl.) in: *Gulistan and Bustan*, Hermes Publishers, Tehran 2004, p. 89.

Hence, in the poet's opinion, language is a tool for improving the soul, a key to the treasury of being a cultured person.¹⁵ Yet speech serves the elevation of a human being only when it meets certain criteria: when it is *sokhan-e savab*¹⁶, that is, when words are uttered properly, appropriately and prudently. For words to contribute to raising a human towards excellence, they must result from reflection. Sa'di asserts that deliberation which ought to precede every utterance is needed, above all, to control language. There is nothing worse than a person who lacks control over the gift of speech.

زبان بریده به کنجی نشستہ صم بکم
 به از کسی کہ نباشد زبانش اندر حکم.¹⁷

To sit in a corner, like one with a cut tongue, deaf and dumb,
 Is better than a man who has no command over his tongue.¹⁸

Secondarily, as the poet emphasises, speech was given to humans "for gratitude and thanks;" hence it ought to be always characterised by softness and compassion. Gentleness evident in articulation and wording is an attribute of a cultured person – a man whom Sa'di calls *saheb-e honar* and considers a paragon of all virtues.¹⁹ Insolence, rudeness or vulgarity, in turn, are to him a clear proof of ignorance. Hence the poet expresses a conviction that a person ought always to formulate their statements *be lof va khoshi*, that is in a gentle and pleasant manner.²⁰

The idea was not alien to Iranians even before Sa'di as a very similar statement concerning speech can be found in earlier Persian literary works. For example, in Ferdousi's *Shahname*, the principle of 'soft spokenness' is widespread – *narmguyi* or *avaz-e narm* that can be understood as a rule to speak quietly, slowly and smoothly and in a moderate manner.²¹ This idea may be considered as a legacy of Pre-Islamic Persian ethical tradition manifested in both Zoroastrian religious texts and texts belonging to the genre of advice literature (*andarz*).²² The ethical aspect of speech can be observed in

¹⁵ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 27. Similar thought can be found in the poetry of the 13th-century Persian poet Jalaloddin Rumi who once wrote: *Ey zaban, ham ganj-e bi payan toi, ey zaban ham ranj-e bi darman toi* (Oh tongue, you are both endless treasure and irremediable pain), Jalaloddin Mohammad Moulavi Rumi, *Masnavi Ma'navi*, R. Nicolson (ed.), vol. I, Mo'assefe-ye entesharat-e amir kabir, Tehran 1373 AP, p. 104.

¹⁶ A similar idea can be found in Naser Khosrou's poetry, where it is called *sokhan-e nik*.

¹⁷ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 26.

¹⁸ Sa'di, *Gulistān*, p. 79.

¹⁹ *Soheb-e honar* – literally the owner of the art, craft, knowledge or particular skills.

²⁰ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 26.

²¹ Dj. Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Adab i. Abad in Iran*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. I, Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), Bibliotheca Persica Press, New York 2001, p. 432.

²² Cf. Shaul Shaked, *Andarz i. Andarz and Andarz Literature in Pre-Islamic Iran*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. II, Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), Bibliotheca Persica Press, New York 2000, pp. 11–22.

the main Zoroastrian moral principle of ‘good thoughts, good words, good deeds.’²³ The book *Javidan Kherad* (“Eternal Wisdom”)²⁴, Pahlavi in origin, also mentions that one of the best moral principles is *narm sokhan* ‘soft speech’.²⁵ In Pahlavi literature, speaking courteously and suavely was regarded as proper, and a role model was someone who is “extremely courteous, sweet in his speech and a great respecter of persons.”²⁶ Based on what Maganlal Amritlal Buch writes on Zoroastrian ethics, we can assume that the purpose of using sweet and civil language, was to develop the capability of “preventing mutual injuries among man.”²⁷ This can be confirmed by what another scholar Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh notices, that in one of the *andarz* texts “it is emphasized that we should not ‘hurt people with words.’”²⁸ This tradition was continued in Islamic ethics which teaches that speech should not hurt or cause any pain.²⁹

The main reason for Sa’di’s conviction on using considered and soft speech in contact with another person is quite similar to what is mentioned above, as the poet is convinced that soft speech helps to avoid or alleviate conflicts and can be a cultured man’s best answer to aggression and vulgarity

دو عاقل را نباشد کین و پیکار
 نه دانایی ستیزد با سبکسار
 اگر نادان به وحشت سخت گوید
 خردمندش به نرمی دل بجوید.³⁰

Two wise men do not contend and quarrel
 Nor does a scholar fight with a contemptible fellow.
 If an ignorant man in his rudeness speaks harshly
 An intelligent man tenderly reconciles his heart.³¹

Measured words can soothe unnecessary emotions, of which the following story is also a proof. A drunkard accosted a certain pious and wise man, who immediately recognised what kind of person he was dealing with and refused to respond to taunts

²³ Mary Boyce, *Humata hūxata huvaršta*, in: *Encyclopædia Iranica*, Vol. XII, Fasc. 5, Encyclopædia Iranica Foundation, New York 2004, pp. 561-562.

²⁴ Translated into Arabic before being lost and then only into New Persian by Persian philosopher Ahmad b. Mohammad b. Meskavaye.

²⁵ Ahmad b. Mohammad b. Meskavaye, *Javidan Kherad* (“Eternal Wisdom”), Mehdi Mohaghegh, Charles Adams (eds.), *Mo’assesse-ye motale’at-e eslami daneshgah-e makgil, sho’be-ye Tehran*, Tehran 1976, p. 59.

²⁶ Maganlal Amritlal Buch, *Zoroastrian Ethics*, Baroda 1919, p. 142.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 143.

²⁸ Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Adab i. Abad in Iran*, p. 432.

²⁹ Ali b. Abi Taleb, *Nahj al-balaghe*, Mohammad Dashti (transl.), Entesharat-e payam-e edalat, Tehran 1389 AP, p. 485.

³⁰ Sa’di, *Golestan*, p. 111.

³¹ Sa’di, *Gulistān*, p. 439.

or to be drawn into a fight. Asked by the bystanders why he was not defending himself against such harassment, he responded that it was not seemly for an intelligent man to squabble with a dim-witted drunkard. In the *Bustan*, Sa'di remarks:

هنرور چنین زندگانی کند
 جفا بیند و مهربانی کند.³²

Thus leads his life the virtuous man:
 Brutality he suffers, himself shows kindness.³³

Sa'di's postulate that verbal aggression should be responded to gently and with kindness is also evident in the worldview of other Persian poets. Sa'di's compatriot Hafez, who lived not many decades after him, wrote that:

آسایش دو گیتی تفسیر این دو حرف است
 با دوستان مروت با دشمنان مدارا.³⁴

The peace of both worlds lies in these two words
 Show kindness to your friends, forbearance to your enemies.³⁵

This idea is clearly present in the *Bustan* tale of a slave who, having been condemned to death, gave a speech filled with kind and calm words; by this, he won the sympathy of the monarch and avoided terrible punishment. Sa'di comments that:

غرض زین حدیث آن که گفتار نرم
 چو آبست بر آتش مرد گرم
 تواضع کن ای دوست با خصم تند
 که نرمی کند تیغ برنده کند.³⁶

This story's purpose is to show soft speech
 Will act as water on the fire of men hot-tempered;
 Be humble, friend, with acrid adversaries,
 For softness blunts a cutting sword.³⁷

³² Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 272.

³³ Sa'di, *Būstān*, p. 1011.

³⁴ Hoja Shamsoddin Mohammad Hafez Shirazi, *Divan* (based on the Mahmud Hakim Farzand Mirzai Wasal's edition), Entesharat-e Pishi, Tehran 1374 AP, p. 22

³⁵ Own translation.

³⁶ Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 277.

³⁷ Sa'di, *Būstān*, p. 1027.

II

Using self-controlled and thoughtful words shapes relations in many other ways, as it makes one's face pleasant to behold. People are naturally drawn to a man with a 'pleasant face', while they avoid someone who has a 'sullen face'. In fact, Sa'di warns his readers to avoid those who are *torsh ruy* (sour-faced) and have *khuy-e zesht* (a nasty-temper), and says that:

شکر عاقل از دست آن کس نخورد
که روی تکبر برو سرکه کرد.³⁸

The intelligent man will not eat sugar from the hand of one,
Who makes a vinegar-face at him for arrogance.³⁹

Better, he adds expressively, to drink warm water from a gutter than to taste sweet syrup from the hands of an arrogant and disagreeable man.⁴⁰ Therefore according to Sa'di, a soft-tempered and kind-faced man is not only closer to God, but also his status in society is higher. The reference to a high status in the eyes of the society translates into the final argument in favour of soft and conciliatory language. Gentle language protects one from shame and public disgrace. It acts similarly to silence and in many situations helps to avoid humiliation (in accordance with the poet's opinion that "man is hidden 'neath his tongue").⁴¹ The reason for this is that gentle words raise an invisible barrier between people that ought to be a permanent element of every relationship with another human being. This barrier can be imagined as a veil woven from the courteous, pleasant and kindly words that may be exchanged between two people. Sa'di compares it to a hair stretched between interlocutors – a hair which, although fragile and barely visible, must remain intact if people are to maintain an appropriate relationship.

دو صاحب‌دل نگهدارند مویی
همیدون سرکشی و آزرجویی
وگر بر هر دو جانب جاهلانند
اگر زنجیر باشد بگسلانند.⁴²

Two pious men keep a hair between them untorn
And so does a mild with a headstrong man.

³⁸ Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 295.

³⁹ Sa'di, *Būstān*, p. 1085.

⁴⁰ Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 271.

⁴¹ *Ibidem.*, p. 303.

⁴² Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 111.

If however both sides are fools
 If there be a chain they will snap it.⁴³

Another metaphor he uses to describe speech is that of a hundred-layered silk tunic which a man dons for contact with others. This tunic is like a suit of armour, defending the wearer against wounds inflicted by a blade made of rude, aggressive or destructive words.⁴⁴ Maintaining such a veil or a barrier of kind words in conversation with another person, creates a decorous connection between people, because it prevents a disagreement from escalating. It is exactly in disagreement and confrontation that Sa'di sees the danger of humiliation, as one may be defiled or discredited in the eyes of others.

چو کردی با کلوخ انداز پیکار
 سر خود را به نادانی شکستی.⁴⁵

When you fighest with a thrower of clods
 Thou ignorantly break thy own head.⁴⁶

By engaging in a confrontation one voluntarily turns oneself into the target of an attack and may therefore expose oneself to many dangers. This is because, as Sa'di argues, whoever aims an arrow towards an enemy must know that he himself becomes a target.⁴⁷ Verbal quarrelling accompanied by aggressive, hostile and offensive language or negative emotions destroy the veil of courtesy and pit people against each other without any barrier. Following the images offered by the poet, the instant when this veil falls or the tunic of delicate words is torn marks the beginning of an open confrontation, which is considered disgraceful for a cultured man and the avoidance of which is so wholeheartedly advised by Sa'di. Dropping this veil of courtesy leaves people naked, exposed to the heat of confrontation, to scathing words, aggression and assault.

This is also the reason behind Sa'di's acceptance of a white lie (*dorugh-e maslahati*). The positive outcome of words uttered is so important for Sa'di that he states that a lie told with good intention is sometimes better than the truth. In the first chapter of his *Golestan*, the poet tells the story of a ruler who convicted a prisoner to death and became the subject of his mockery and insults. Intrigued by what the prisoner said, the king asked him to repeat his words. The good-natured vizier (*nikmahzar*) twisted the words of the condemned man by saying that he expressed the view that those who abase their anger and forgive would be rewarded by God. The shah, impressed by the speech of the prisoner, decided to show mercy and to forgive the man. But the other vizier protested

⁴³ Sa'di, *Gulistān*, p. 439.

⁴⁴ Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 277.

⁴⁵ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 52.

⁴⁶ Sa'di, *Gulistān*, p. 177.

⁴⁷ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 52.

by saying that people of such rank, should only speak the truth, so the king must know that the prisoner in fact insulted and cursed him. In answer, however, the ruler said:

دروغ وی پسندیده تر آمد مرا زین راست که تو گفتی که روی آن در مصلحتی بود
 و بنای این بر خبیثی و خردمندان گفته‌اند دروغی مصلحت‌آمیز به که راستی
 فتنه‌انگیز.⁴⁸

That lie was more acceptable to me than this truth thou hast uttered because the former proceeded from a conciliatory disposition and the latter from malignity; and wise men have said: “A falsehood resulting in conciliation is better than a truth producing trouble.”⁴⁹

III

However, the danger of open conflict lies not only in being vulnerable to aggression but also in the possibility of exposing human vices, weaknesses or flaws. Any confrontation which is accompanied by meaningless speech, just as any reckless behaviour or foolish words may reveal human imperfection.

چون نداری کمال فضل آن به
 که زبان در دهان نگه داری
 آدمی را زبان فضیحه کند
 جوز بی مغز را سبکساری.⁵⁰

If thou possess not the perfection of excellence
 It is best to keep thy tongue within thy mouth.
 Disgrace is brought on a man by his tongue.
 A walnut, having no kernel, will be light.⁵¹

This aspect of Sa‘di’s teachings is also depicted in a *Bustan* story of a man who lost his good reputation and was put to shame as a consequence of his shortcomings being revealed. A good-natured sage in Egypt who, due to his reticence gathered around himself a group of people, once decided to confront his audience and spoke. Unfortunately, as soon as he uttered his first words, frailties of his character were

⁴⁸ Sa‘di, *Golestan*, p. 31.

⁴⁹ Sa‘di, *Gulistān*, p. 97.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 162.

⁵¹ Sa‘di, *Gulistān*, p. 649.

revealed. He then admitted that if he had looked in the mirror before he spoke, he would have realized his weaknesses and would have never torn the veil that covered them.⁵² In this particular situation, the veil that covered the sage's vices was not speech but silence, but the mechanism remains the same. In human interactions, soft speech forms a screen, which if dropped or torn, leaves a person naked with all his imperfections visible to the outside world. What Sa'di speaks of here is not a physical ugliness that is revealed, but a flaw in the soul that should be hidden, not exposed. Sa'di warns his readers that:

اگر عالمی، هیبت خود میر
 و گر جاهلی، پرده خود مدر.⁵³

If you are learned, make not away with your own dignity:
 If ignorant fool, rent not the veil around you.⁵⁴

By articulating this thought Sa'di follows here the Islamic theological concept of *eybpushi*, or *khatapushi*, that is a percept of covering or keeping hidden one's vices or imperfections. The concept was developed especially in Shi'ite Islam, where following the Quranic message on not deriding others⁵⁵, theologians and philosophers formulated the argument that a person's weaknesses and faults should not be exposed in the sight of another man. It is said that the first Shi'a imam, Ali had said that people's faults and sins will be hidden till their end.⁵⁶ According to Shi'ite doctrine, the Creator sees all the person's weaknesses, but decides to keep them secret, so the person could keep his or her dignity in the eyes of others. The 19th-century Persian theologian Mulla Ahmad Naraqi wrote that every person commits several sins each day – and God sees them all, but does not remove the veil that conceals them.⁵⁷ Hence in Shi'ite Islam, God is sometimes described as *khatapush* – He who veils the errors and faults of His creatures.⁵⁸ The idea is also present in Persian literary tradition. That is how a 13th-century Persian poet Moulana Jalaloddin Rumi comments on the issue:

⁵² Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 303.

⁵³ *Ibidem.*, p. 303.

⁵⁴ Sa'di, *Būstān*, p. 1109.

⁵⁵ Quran 104:1; 9:79; 49:11.

⁵⁶ Ali b. Abi Taleb, *Nahj al-balaghe*, p. 453.

⁵⁷ Ahmad b. Mohammad Mehdi Naraqi, *Ma'raj al-sa'ade*, Adine-ye sabz, Tehran 1390 AP, p. 451.

⁵⁸ A similar idea can be found in the New Testament, in the first letter of Saint Peter where it is said that God covers man's sins with His love. "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins." The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version containing the Old and New Testaments with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press 1990, 1 Peter 4:8.

این قدر ارشاد تو بخشیده‌ای
 تا بدین بس عیب ما پوشیده‌ای.⁵⁹

You have granted us much of your guidance
 You have covered so many of our sins?⁶⁰

For Sa'di the conclusion is obvious, and again is not very far from what other Persian authors articulated. If God obscures human weakness, and veils people's faults so that people could enjoy the respect of others, they should not act otherwise. According to Sa'di, being a cultured person does not necessarily mean being faultless, but results in the fact that the defects of character remain hidden from the sight of others, covered by a veil of courtesy and politeness. The only one entitled to see a man's defects is God. Here, Sa'di seems to follow religious ethics in which to disclose someone's faults and to seek signs of imperfection in another human being is considered to be one of the more serious sins.⁶¹ The sin born from disclosing someone's weakness and mocking their faults is the sin of violating that which in Persian culture is called *aberu* – i.e. the person's reputation, good name or good image in the eyes of others sometimes referred to as *niknami*.⁶² Thus, disclosing someone's faults or defects destroys his or her *aberu*. In Persian, *aberu* refers to the "light or glow of the face" (though its popular etymology is "water of the face"), and translates directly into esteem, respect and social position that in many situations can also be equated with dignity. A person with *aberu* is revered and venerated. Sa'di himself also considers a person's *aberu* to be an essential quality, and an important element of every person's public and social life, saying that:

و حکیمان گفته اند: آب حیات اگر فروشد فی المثل به آب روی. دانا نخرد که مردن
 به علت، به از زندگانی به مذلت.⁶³

63

Philosophers have said: "If for instance the water of life were to be exchanged for a good reputation, no wise man would purchase it because it is preferable to die with honour then to live in disgrace."⁶⁴

Sa'di points to the fact that human *aberu* is also a valuable quality in the eyes of God, who covers peoples' sins and takes care that people keep their good name and reputation in the eyes of their fellow men. As he writes:

⁵⁹ Rumi, *Masnavi Ma'navi*, vol. I, p. 114.

⁶⁰ Own translation.

⁶¹ Abdolhosein Dastgheyb, *Gonahan-e kabire* ("Great sins"), Nas, Tehran 1390 AP, p. 729; p. 509.

⁶² I elaborate on this idea in: *A Contribution to the Study of the Persian Concept of Aberu* "Hemispheres. Studies on the Cultures and Societies" 2014, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 113–127.

⁶³ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 92.

⁶⁴ Sa'di, *Gulistān*, p. 365.

برده ناموس بندگان به گناه فاحش ندرد، و وظیفه روزی به خطای منکر نبرد.⁶⁵

He tears not the veil of reputation of his worshippers even for grievous sins,
and does not withhold their daily allowance of bread for great crimes.⁶⁶

It is entirely unseemly for a human being therefore to act in a way that could damage his own or someone else's favourable image in society. The poet also warns against reproaching others for their faults, because this may not only injure someone's good name, but may also respectively undermine a person's own reputation. The poet writes:

مردمان را عیب نهانی پیدا مکن که مرایشان را رسوا کنی، و خود را بی اعتماد.⁶⁷

Reveal not the secret faults of man because thou wilt put them to shame
and wilt forfeit thy own confidence.⁶⁸

Islamic teachings of religious literature are full of moral maxims similar to the following: "Do not follow vices and errors of the believers, because whoever seeks imperfection in a brother, God will seek imperfections in him, and if He finds it, he will be disgraced."⁶⁹ Sa'di consequently warns the reader that:

نیک سهلست زنده بیجان کرد
کشته را باز زنده نتوان کرد
شرط عقلست صیر تیرانداز
که چو رفت از کمان نیاید باز.⁷⁰

70

It is quite easy to deprive a man of life.
When he is slain he cannot be resuscitated again.
It is a condition of wisdom in the archer to be patient
Because when the arrow leaves the bow it returns no more.⁷¹

For this reason, Sa'di warns his readers to avoid situations (whether this be a verbal confrontation or senseless speech), which may reveal people's weaknesses and imperfections. That is also the reason why silence is so valued, as it is often the easiest

⁶⁵ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 23.

⁶⁶ Sa'di, *Gulistān*, p. 69.

⁶⁷ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 163.

⁶⁸ Sa'di, *Gulistān*, p. 651.

⁶⁹ Hamed Rahmat Kashani, *Farhang-e sokhanan-e rasul-e khoda* (The Dictionary of God's Prophet Message), Payam-e edalat: Tehran, 1391 AP; Ali b. Abi Taleb, *Nahj al-balaghe*, p. 356.

⁷⁰ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 165.

⁷¹ Sa'di, *Gulistān*, p. 657.

way to prevent embarrassment. However, man cannot be silent all the time. If he speaks, then appropriate, sensible and soft language with kind words can shape his interactions with others, alleviate the heat of conflict and can therefore play a similar protective role as silence.

Concern for keeping *aberu* in contact with another person seems to be a key argument in Sa‘di’s philosophy of human relations. The poet warns against destroying someone else’s good reputation in the neighbourhood because it is likely that fortune will wreck a person’s *aberu* in the whole city.⁷² Material possessions may come and go, as he notices, whereas *aberu* – the respect and esteem of one’s fellow men – guarantees life-long tranquillity and peace of mind; its loss, in turn, makes life more complicated.

سختست پس از جاه، تحکم بردن
خو کرده به ناز، جور مردم بردن.⁷³

It is difficult to obey after losing dignity
and to bear violence from men after being caressed.⁷⁴

Sa‘di is convinced that a violation of another person’s *aberu* in the eyes of society destroys not only the person himself, but damages the very foundations of social life. When someone’s good name is destroyed, that person becomes untrustworthy in the eyes of others; he may be ostracized and may feel excluded. Deprived of his good name, he suffers disgrace and his social position is weakened. Sa‘di’s concern for an individual’s welfare is therefore a concern manifested towards the whole society. In the poet’s view, this state of affairs – that is, depriving someone of *aberu*, good image, name and reputation – cannot bring anything good; it only begets mistrust between people. Hence, a person’s perfection depends on whether the words he utters reinforce concord and empathy between people and thus safeguard dignity.

IV

It is, however, important to notice that Sa‘di’s call to take care of *aberu* (both one’s own and someone else’s) in an everyday interaction is not a sign of vanity or arrogance connected with longing for high esteem and good fame, but conversely, a testimony to the poet’s humility (*tavazo‘*), which in Perso-Islamic ethical tradition is considered to be one of the greatest virtues of all.⁷⁵ Sa‘di recognizes it as a condition for humanity as he states that:

⁷² Sa‘di, *Bustan*, p. 306.

⁷³ Sa‘di, *Golestan*, p. 139.

⁷⁴ Sa‘di, *Gulistān*, p. 559.

⁷⁵ Sa‘di himself wrote a whole chapter on humility in his *Bustan*, but the concept can be found in many other Persian literary texts.

بنی آدم سرشت از خاک دارد
 اگر خاکی نباشد آدمی نیست.⁷⁶

A man's nature is of earth.
 If he is not humble he is not a man.⁷⁷

Because God conceals a person's faults and sins and allows human beings to enjoy respect in the eyes of others, they ought to adopt a similar perspective. This should be manifested in man's decision not to harm others, not to insult them and not to put them to shame, as it might destroy or undermine their good name. The idea is beautifully expressed by the poet himself in one of his *masnavis*:

من آن مورم که در پایم بمالند
 نه زنبورم که از دستم بنالند
 کجا خود شکر این نعمت گزارم
 که زور مردم آزاری ندارم.⁷⁸

I am that ant which is trodden under foot
 Not the wasp, the pain of whose sting causes lament.
 How shall I give due thanks for the blessing
 That I do not possess the strength of injuring mankind?⁷⁹

Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari, a well-known 20th-century Iranian Shi'a scholar philosopher proposed a slightly different reading of the last verse. Instead of the words: "that I do not possess the strength of injuring mankind," he suggested: "that although I have the power, I do not cause anyone distress."⁸⁰ Motahhari's proposal even better illustrates the idea that respect for other people is a matter of choice rather than human nature.

For Sa'di, humility is also a key element of proper human relations. As such it should be understood in the context of such terms as modesty (*shekaste nafsi, forutani*) or lowering oneself in front of others (*ezhar-e khari*) which are still present in Persian social convention. Such humility does not lead to humiliation, but enriches and ennobles man, and as Sa'di himself says:

⁷⁶ Sa'di, *Golestan*, p. 85.

⁷⁷ Sa'di, *Gulistān*, p. 327.

⁷⁸ Sa'di, *Mawa'ez* (Sermons) in: *Kolliyat-e Sa'di*, p. 784.

⁷⁹ Muslih'uddin Sa'di, *The Gulistan Or Rose Garden of Sa'di*, E. Rehatsek (trans.), D. Rosenbaum (ed.), Omphaloskepsis Books 2010, s. 101.

⁸⁰ Mohammad Kazem Kamran, *Wisdom of Sa'di*, Alhoda International Publishers and Distributions, p. 59.

طربقت جز این نیست درویش را
 که افکنده دارد تن خویش را
 بلندیت باید تواضع گزین
 که آن بام را نیست سلم جز این.⁸¹

There is for the darvish no other way
 Than to keep his person cast down;
 If eminence is what you'd have, then choose humility,
 For this is the sole ladder to ascend to such a rooftop.⁸²

It is also lowering oneself and accepting one's inconspicuousness that for Sa'di builds man's *aberu* in the eyes of others. *Tawazo 'sar-e raf'at afrazadat* "humility will elevate the head of exaltation for you" he says in his *Bustan*.⁸³ Being humble is accompanied by awareness that both the soul and intellect, as well as the tongue, are not the sole conditions of a person's humanity but only its preconditions that enable man to prove his nobility.

The humility that the poet sees as an important element of everyday life, stands in opposition to arrogance or insolence, *takabbor*, which as he writes *be khak andar andazadat*, "will cast you in the dust".⁸⁴ *Takabbor* is a character defect and is born from giving priority to the lowest dimension of the human soul – *nafs-e ammare* – which is a seat of worldly lusts.⁸⁵ As Arley Loewen states, in Sufi literature, the battle against the ego was expressed exactly by following proper conduct which meant giving up one's own needs in favour of a supreme goal.⁸⁶ Man instinctively concentrates on meeting his lowest needs, follows *nafs*, and places oneself in the centre, and this causes arrogance. As an example of such a man, Sa'di presents someone who becomes embroiled in a dispute and seeks confrontations, a situation that eventually ends in his disgrace.

یکی ناسزا گفت در وقت جنگ
 گریبان دریدند وی را به جنگ
 قفاخورده، عریان و گریان نشست
 جهان دیده ای گفتش ای خودپرست
 چو غنچه گرت بسته بودی دهن
 دریده ندیدی چو گل پیرهن.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 265.

⁸² Sa'di, *Būstān*, p. 989.

⁸³ Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 265.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 265.

⁸⁵ Quran 12:53.

⁸⁶ Arley Loewen, *Proper Conduct (Adab) Is Everything: The Futuwwat-nāmah-i Sultānī of Husayn Va'iz-i Kashifī*, "Iranian Studies" 2003, Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 550.

⁸⁷ Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 303.

A man while quarrelling said what was improper,
 And those who stood by tore his collar with their claws;
 He suffered cuffs and sat down, naked, weeping,
 At which one, world-experienced, said: 'O worshipper of the self!'⁸⁸

Here such a man is called *khod parast*, one who worships oneself. In the centre of his interest he places not God or another person but his own ego. Sa'di questions the humanity of such a person by saying:

کسی سیرت آدمی گوش کرد
 که اول سگ نفس خاموش کرد.⁸⁹

A person can heed humanity's course
 Only when he's silenced the lower-self's dog.⁹⁰

Again, Sa'di's words correspond with the ideas expressed in Persian mystical tradition, in which human perfection is seen as a state achieved by moderating *nafs*.⁹¹ For Sa'di, controlling *nafs* results in being humble, respectful of others and peace-loving.

V

Seyyed Ata'ollah Mohajerani, a Persian historian and writer, called Sa'di a poet of *modara* and *mehrabani*, that is tolerance and kindness, and considered it to be one of the reasons for the lasting relevance of his poetry.⁹² Indeed, the philosophy that emerges from Sa'di's approach is one of consent and amicability, of reconciliation that manifests itself particularly in an encounter between two people. What shapes this meeting in Sa'di's view are soft and kind words, which calm emotions and prevent an escalation of controversy. By preventing the symbolic hair of interaction from being torn, people form proper and healthy relations. This relationship is also based on mutual respect for a person's *aberu* – that is, good image in the eyes of others. When the relationship is not worthy of attention, speech or its absence allows one to avoid unwanted confrontation, but save face (*aberu*). This in turn is very important because for Sa'di the respect for human *aberu* would appear to be the foundation of society. This respect should be directed toward both one's own *aberu* and the *aberu* of the interlocutor. Any violation

⁸⁸ Sa'di, *Būstān*, p. 1111.

⁸⁹ Sa'di, *Bustan*, p. 293.

⁹⁰ Sa'di, *Būstān*, p. 1079.

⁹¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1978, p. 112.

⁹² Seyyed Ata'ollah Mohajerani, *Sa'di sha'er-e modara va mehrabani* (Sa'di a Poet of Tolerance and Kindness), Viewed 15 January 2017, <<http://sadishenasi.com/Detail.aspx?id=693>>.

of it, brought about by shame or humiliation, infringes social order, evoking insecurity and instability because it makes people unreliable in relation to each other. Above all it is also a form of wicked behaviour, in which someone puts himself ahead of God, who in His mercifulness chooses to veil a man's weaknesses rather than expose them. That is why in many occasions Sa'di emphasizes the need to avoid any risky situations that may directly lead to the disclosure of anyone's vices, shortcomings and weaknesses as this may harm this person's *aberu*, which is guarded by God. Whether man maintains his *aberu* depends, therefore, not only on his own behaviour, but also lies in the hands of others, those who might decide to respect or destroy it. In one of his *ghazals* Sa'di writes:

ای کاب زندگانی من در دهان تست
تیر هلاک ظاهر من در کمان تست.⁹³

Oh You who keep the water of my life in your mouth
In your bow, there is an arrow that can destroy my appearance.⁹⁴

Appearance, here expressed by the term *zaher*, meaning what is external and visible to others, can be compared to *aberu*, one's good image, which may be subject to someone's attack or an attempt to point out various shortcomings or mistakes that may expose someone to shame. Therefore, for Sa'di what might be shameful in man, his ignorance, momentary weakness or rudeness should be kept hidden, covered by the veil of conciliatory words – courtesy woven from kind words, placatory gestures or silence.⁹⁵ Following Ali Farughi's belief that in Sa'di's poetry 'Iranity' had reached its perfection, we should not be surprised by the obvious similarity of Sa'di's philosophy and the complicated system of phrases and behaviours called *ta'arof* popular among Iranians. It's hard not to notice that the Persian system of courtesy and its use corresponds with Sa'di's thought. Even today *ta'arof* helps Iranians to avoid embarrassment and save face in a difficult situation.⁹⁶

Keeping the veil of courteous speech untouched during a meeting with another person protects both sides from controversies or other situations that could bring disgrace and could result in losing *aberu*. Reciprocity is here crucial, as we read in the collection of the 12th-century book of advice *Pandname* whose authorship was attributed to the Persian poet Attar:

⁹³ Sa'di, *Ghazaliyat* ("Ghazals") in: *Kolliyat-e Sa'di*, p. 380, ghazal 56.

⁹⁴ Own translation.

⁹⁵ This view seems to be deeply rooted in Islamic tradition, as Ibn Arabi said that God forbade what is shameful, that is "only that which has been made openly manifest (while in truth it should have been kept concealed.)" T. Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1984, p. 250.

⁹⁶ On *ta'arof* see: William Beeman, *Language, Status, and Power in Iran*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1986.

ای برادر پرده مردم مدر
تا ندرد پردهات شخص دگر.⁹⁷

O brother! Do not tear people's veil
So that yours would not be torn.⁹⁸

Such an approach may be considered the highest expression of humanity that can be summarised again in the following verses of Persian poetry:

قدر مردم را شناس ای محترم
تا شناسند دیگران قدر تو هم.⁹⁹

Know people's magnitude, respected one
So that others will know yours too.¹⁰⁰

Maintaining proper relations with others is therefore both a sign of humility and dignity. Sa'di was an outstanding humanist who, as Abdolhosein Zarrinkub noticed, "wondered about man and his fate, and how upbringing and morality may help him to achieve earthly welfare."¹⁰¹ Sa'di's philosophy of human relations is a story of a concern for human dignity, where humanity is perceived as a process, possible to achieve in a constant effort to act as if in every meeting the third, inseparable participant was God Himself. Since God veils man's imperfections, people should do the same. That is where the moral aspect of proper speech reveals itself in its most visible way. Wise and kind speech as well as proper words act as a veil that can cover someone's imperfection, can help to avoid shame and disgrace and thus can become a sign of respect for one's good name and reputation in the eyes of others.

⁹⁷ Attar, *Pandname*, Ketabkhana-ye elektroniki, <<http://ketabfarsi.ir>>, p. 19.

⁹⁸ Own translation.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Own translation.

¹⁰¹ A. Zarrinkub, *Hadis-e khosh-e Sa'di*, p. 115.