

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-4, AUGUST 2025

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**
Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

The Moral Voice of Saadi Shirazi in Western Literature: A Cross-Cultural Case Study

Matluba Isoeva

Ph.D. Scholar,

Department of English and M.E.L.,

University of Lucknow.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17056169>

Article History: Submitted-30/07/2025, Revised-10/08/2025, Accepted-19/08/2025, Published-31/08/2025.

Abstract:

Saadi Shirazi, a central figure in classical Persian and Tajik literature, profoundly influenced Western literary and philosophical traditions. Since the seventeenth century, translations of his *Gulistan* and *Bustan* have shaped the moral imagination of writers such as La Fontaine, Voltaire, Goethe, Hugo, Emerson, Thoreau, and numerous other Western thinkers. This paper examines how Saadi's narrative design and ethical teachings were reinterpreted across cultural and linguistic contexts, establishing his enduring role in world literature.

Keywords: Saadi Shirazi, Persian-Tajik literature, Western literature, cross-cultural influence, translation, ethical storytelling.

Introduction

Persian-Tajik literature has long served as a source of poetic innovation and ethical reflection. Among its classical masters—Ferdowsi, Rumi, Hafez, and Khayyam—Saadi Shirazi (1184–1291) stands out for his moral insight and cross-cultural appeal. His masterpieces, *Gulistan (The Rose Garden)* and *Bustan (The Orchard)*, gained widespread recognition in the West through translations that began in the seventeenth century. Rather

than being just a representation of Eastern exoticism, Saadi functions as a cultural mediator whose insights on justice, compassion, humility, and the fleeting nature of life have found fresh expression within Enlightenment, Romantic, and Transcendentalist thought.

This paper, through selected case studies, traces how Saadi's teachings have informed Western literature, not as static lessons but as dynamic elements of ethical reinterpretation.

Methodology

This study employs a combination of comparative literary analysis and reception history. Primary sources encompass translations of the *Gulistan* and *Bustan*, along with their prefaces and commentaries. Additionally, they include the literary works of European and American authors who referenced or drew inspiration from Saadi.

This research builds upon David Damrosch's theory of world literature, which sees cross-cultural exchange as an ongoing process of reinterpretation. It explores how Western writers have interacted with and engaged with the works of Saadi. Each case study centres on an author whose engagement with Saadi is evident through intertextual parallels, direct quotations, or thematic echoes. Instead of providing an exhaustive catalogue, this paper highlights significant moments of influence that demonstrate how Saadi's ethical vision has evolved across time and literary traditions.

La Fontaine and Early European Adaptation

One of the earliest European poets significantly influenced by Saadi was Jean de La Fontaine (1621–1695), the celebrated French fabulist. Saadi's *Gulistan* inspired La Fontaine's renowned *Fables*, a collection of twelve books comprising 243 stories in verse. These fables employ allegory and animal protagonists to convey moral lessons, a narrative style deeply rooted in Persian storytelling. In creating *The Fables*, La Fontaine drew

inspiration from a range of Eastern sources, including the tales of *Kalila and Dimna*, *Anvar-i Suhaili*, and, most significantly, the ideas of Saadi found in *Gulistan*.

Several of La Fontaine's fables directly parallel tales from Saadi's work, often expanding or adapting their ethical themes. For example, "The Boy and the Schoolmaster" (Book I, Fable XIX) echoes tales 7 and 5 in Chapters 1 and 2 of *Gulistan*. Likewise, "The Mogul's Dream" (Book XI, IV) is almost directly drawn from *Gulistan* (Chapter 2, Tale 16). In this story, a Mogul dreams of a vizier in paradise while a poor hermit endures suffering in hell, providing a moral reflection on the nature of justice and highlighting the significance of inner character that mirrors Saadi's narrative:

Long since, a Mogul saw, in dream, / A vizier in Elysian bliss;/ no higher joy could
be or seem, / or purer, than was ever his. / Elsewhere was dream'd of by the same/ A
wretched hermit wrapp'd in flame, / Whose lot e'en touch'd, so pain'd was he, / The
partners of his misery. Was Minos mock'd? or had these ghosts, / By some mistake,
exchanged their posts? (La Fontaine 208)

Many other fables also resonate with Saadi's moral vision, including "The Ploughman and His Sons" (Book VII, IX), "The Peacock Complaining to Juno" (II, XVII), "The Mule Boasting of His Genealogy" (VI, VII), "Death and the Dying" (VIII, I), "Education" (VIII, XXIV), "The Shepherd and the King" (X, X), and "The Two Parrots, The King, and His Son" (X, XII). These fables exhibit ethical themes and the concise, didactic tone characteristics of Saadi's style.

By adapting Persian moral tales into French verse, La Fontaine established a literary model that Enlightenment writers would later refine and build upon. His fables not only reflect narrative borrowing but also reveal a deeper philosophical transmission, where Eastern ethics informed Western modes of moral instruction.

Enlightenment Writers and Saadi

During the Age of Reason, French intellectuals drew inspiration from Saadi's ethical writings to challenge the monarchy, religious dogma, social inequality, and political oppression. His reflections on justice, kingship, and compassion aligned closely with contemporary ideals of rationality and humanism. As Shokir Mukhtor observes, in the decades leading up to the French Revolution, Saadi's ideas on kingship and justice were often interpreted as covert criticisms of absolutism and tyranny (132). Ismail Azar notes that French engagement with *Gulistan* was so intense that it seemed Saadi had written it "specifically for France of that time" (43).

Antoine Bauderon de Senece's tale of a poet thrown to the dogs draws directly from *Gulistan* (Chapter 4, Tale 10). Denis Diderot (1713–1784) translated sections from the foreword and stories of *Gulistan*, particularly concerning the ethics of kings, which influenced his moral philosophy. He held Saadi's insights in high regard, integrating their essence into his literary works. Jean-François de Saint-Lambert likewise invoked Saadi's humanism in his preface to *The Seasons* (1769), condemning social injustice and defending the oppressed.

The opera-comedy *Gulistan ou le Hulla de Samarcande* (1806) by Poisson de La Chabeaussière further illustrates Saadi's cultural reach. Structured in three acts, the opera features a protagonist named Gulistan who embodies Saadi's philosophical ideals, preserving key moral lessons from the original text while adapting them for a theatrical audience.

Philosophical Parallels between Voltaire and Saadi

Voltaire's philosophical approach—concise, ironic, and ethically charged—shares notable similarities with Saadi's storytelling. Drawing inspiration from Montesquieu's

Persian Letters, Voltaire frequently infused his works with Persian motifs and narrative forms.

In his philosophical novella, *Zadig, or The Book of Fate*, Voltaire blends Eastern imagery with Enlightenment principles. Persian themes and sayings, like “sages”, “dervishes”, “love your friends”, and “make no enemies”, resonate with Saadi’s ethical teachings, but they are expressed through a more secular and rationalist lens. Saadi’s Sufi-influenced prose and poetry emphasise humility and inner virtue, while Voltaire reinterprets these principles to critique religious hypocrisy and authoritarianism. Kautizan notes that it is not surprising for influential thinkers of the Age of Reason and Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, to hold Saadi in such high esteem (10). The French revolutionary leader Carnot even chose to name his son after Saadi, highlighting the poet’s significant cultural influence.

Despite differences in tone and worldview, both Saadi and Voltaire promote ethics rooted in empathy, moderation, and critical thought. These adaptations demonstrate that Saadi’s parables were reinterpreted as valuable tools for ethical and political critique. Saadi emphasises humility and compassion in governance, while Voltaire adapts this ethos to a European context, using Persian models to challenge institutional injustice. His writings have been reinterpreted within the context of Enlightenment humanism, tailored for modern audiences while preserving their core moral values.

Victor Hugo’s Reflection on Eastern Thought

Continuing the thread of Saadi’s influence into the Romantic era, Victor Hugo engaged deeply with the Persian ethical and poetic ideals. In the epigraph to *Les Orientales* (1829), Hugo quotes the opening of *Gulistan*, wishing to craft poetry as enduring as an unfading rose garden. This reference reflects not only literary admiration but also a philosophical

alignment with Saadi's contemplations on impermanence and the transient nature of worldly things.

Saadi: "You are not ignorant that the flower of the garden soon fadeth, and that the enjoyment of the rose-bush is but of a short continuance; and the sages have declared, that the heart ought not to be set upon anything transitory." (103)

Hugo: "*D'ailleurs les sages ont dit: Il ne faut point attacher son cœur aux choses passagères.*" ("Besides, the wise have said: One should not attach one's heart to fleeting things.")

The shared meditation on impermanence reflects a spiritual connection Hugo felt with Saadi. Both poets ponder the fleeting nature of beauty, fame, and worldly power, encouraging readers to anchor their values in lasting wisdom rather than momentary pleasures. Hugo's focus on mortality and ethical transcendence echoes Saadi's contemplative ethos. In this literary tribute, Saadi is not just an Eastern muse but also a moral predecessor whose insights into human experience found renewed expression in the emotional and political landscapes of nineteenth-century Europe.

Louis Aragon's Modern Engagement

In the 20th century, Louis Aragon, a famous French poet and novelist, continued this legacy. While Surrealism shaped Aragon's early work, he later turned towards political realism. His mature writings, however, reflect a return to more introspective and morally grounded themes, many of which draw from classical traditions, including those of Persian-Tajik literature.

His novel *Elsa* contains frequent allusions to *Gulistan*. As Javad Hadidi notes, after exploring various literary and ideological movements, Aragon ultimately returned to what

he metaphorically called “the doorstep of Saadi”(69). In doing so, he sought a poetic voice grounded in moral clarity and humanistic resonance, qualities he recognised in Saadi’s writings.

For Aragon, Saadi was more than a literary figure; he was a guide through the moral confusion of modernity. Hadidi further observes that the “perfume” of Saadi’s humanism lingers in some of Aragon’s most thoughtful prose and within the finest traditions of modern literature (70).

Aragon’s engagement with Saadi illustrates not only the enduring relevance of Persian ethical literature in modern European thought but also emphasises how Saadi’s voice—centuries old—continues to inspire writers grappling with the moral complexities of their time through poetical language.

Goethe’s *West–Eastern Divan*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was one of the most prominent European admirers of Saadi Shirazi. His work, *West–östlicher Divan (West–Eastern Divan, 1819)*, bridges German Romanticism and Persian poetic traditions, blending Eastern and Western thought into a shared ethical vision. Although Goethe is primarily known for his influence from Hafez, the impact of Saadi is also significant, particularly through the ethical maxims found in his work, the “Book of Maxims (*Hikmat-Nameh*)”.

Goethe encountered Saadi through Adam Olearius’s 1654 German translation, *Persianischer Rosenthal*, which introduced selections from the *Gulistan* to a European audience. Saadi’s concise moral tales and philosophical introspection resonated deeply with Goethe’s conception of literature as a means for ethical reflection. For example, Goethe’s verse -

“But why would you investigate

Where human kindness may flow?

Upon the water cast your cate;

The eater, who shall know?" (83)

closely mirrors Saadi's verse:

Tu nekui kunu dar Dajla andoz

Ki Ezid dar biyobonat dihad boz.

(Do good and cast it into the Tigris; God will return it to you in the desert.)

Saadi's influence appears in Goethe's reflections on poetic duty and the indifference of the audience as well:

Mo nasihat ba joi khud kardem,

Ruzgore dar in ba sar burdem.

Gar nayoyad ba gushi ragbati kas,

Bar rasulon payom boshadu bas!

(We have offered our counsel in its proper place and spent much time on this labour;

/ if no ear listens eagerly, it is enough that the messengers deliver the message.)

(*Gulistan* 91)

Beyond imitation, Goethe's idea of Weltliteratur, or world literature—a globally shared moral literature—was shaped by Saadi's worldview. These interactions with Saadi illustrate that Persian texts were more than mere literary curiosities; they served as essential sources for moral and philosophical contemplation in the West. Saadi was not only a poetic inspiration but also a model for ethical and human-centred cosmopolitanism.

Saadi's Ideas in Anglo-American Literature

Saadi Shirazi's influence extended beyond Europe into the Anglo-American literary tradition, particularly through the works of Transcendentalist thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Unlike their European counterparts, who often adapted Saadi's tales for political critique or moral instruction, these American writers approached his work as a spiritual and philosophical guide. They drew on his parables to support ideals of simplicity, ethical individualism, and inner freedom, values at the heart of American Transcendentalism.

Emerson and Saadi's Moral Philosophy

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a key figure in the American Transcendentalist movement, was one of Saadi Shirazi's most enthusiastic admirers in the English-speaking world. He regarded *Gulistan* as a spiritual and ethical classic, referring to it as the Bible for universal conduct. Emerson discovered *Gulistan* through Baron von Hammer-Purgstall's German version and Francis Gladwin's English translation. His admiration ran so deep that when Ticknor and Fields reissued Gladwin's translation in 1865, Emerson was asked to write the preface. There, he praised the enduring clarity of Saadi's vision: "Through his Persian dialect, he speaks to all nations... and is perpetually modern" (8).

Emerson positioned Saadi as a literary equal to Homer, Shakespeare, and Montaigne, praising his wit, conciseness, and gentle moralism. He contrasted Saadi's "benevolent wisdom" with the cynicism of figures like Byron, noting that Saadi instils "good hope" in the reader. In his long poem "Saadi" (1842), Emerson goes further, turning admiration into homage. In it, he declares:

Saadi, so far thy words shall reach:

The Sun rises and sets in Saadi's speech!

This lyrical celebration beautifully highlights Emerson's profound admiration for Saadi's wisdom, practical sense, and moral sentiments. He found particular inspiration in Saadi's emphasis on inner richness, spiritual independence, and the significance of transcending material illusions:

Seek the living among the dead,—
Man in man is imprisoned;
Barefooted Dervish is not poor,
If fate unlocks his bosom's door. (Emerson, *Saadi*)

Though Emerson's interpretation of Saadi occasionally drifted into the mystical, it firmly rested on a shared belief that moral action is the highest form of wisdom. In these writings, Emerson transformed Saadi from a distant Eastern poet into a universal moral philosopher, whose aphorisms resonated with American ideals of self-reliance, ethical clarity, and spiritual depth.

Thoreau's Spiritual Kinship with Saadi

Henry David Thoreau, a fellow Transcendentalist and close intellectual companion of Emerson, also expressed profound admiration for Saadi Shirazi. While Emerson portrayed Saadi as a global moral teacher, Thoreau engaged with him more intimately, as a spiritual guide for personal reflection and ethical living.

In *Walden*, Thoreau directly references *Gulistan*, quoting a parable about the cypress tree, which bears no fruit and is therefore called "*azad*", or free. The tree symbolises detachment, autonomy, and inner freedom:

I read in the Gulistan, or Flower Garden, of Sheik Sadi of Shiraz, that: ‘They asked a wise man... why the cypress alone is called azad (free). He replied: each has its appropriate produce, and appointed season; the cypress has none, and so if free... and of this nature are the azads, or religious independents. (*Walden* 81)

For Thoreau, the metaphor symbolised the ideal of spiritual independence and moral self-reliance, principles he sought to embody in his life and work. Like Saadi, Thoreau rejected materialism, prized humility, and found truth in solitude and simplicity. As literary scholar and influential Orientalist Reynold Nicholson noted, even in lyrical poetry, Saadi often comes across “less a dervish and mystic than a moralist and man of the world” (156). This practical humanism resonated deeply with Thoreau, who valued concise, parabolic wisdom over theological abstraction.

Thoreau saw in Saadi not merely an admired author, but a philosophical counterpart, expressing through Persian verse the same ethical principles he explored at *Walden*. Saadi’s style—brief, reflective, and morally direct—mirrored the Transcendentalists’ ideals and further anchored Persian ethics within the American literary tradition.

Although less direct, echoes of Saadi’s ethos may also appear in the works of later American writers. For example, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway contains themes of dignity, humility, endurance, and stoic grace that parallel the tone and spirit of Saadian ethics, though no explicit link is confirmed.

Conclusion

Saadi Shirazi’s moral voice has resonated through the centuries, transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries to shape the ethical landscape of the West. His influence is evident in the fables of La Fontaine, the Enlightenment critiques of Voltaire, the cosmopolitan

poetry of Goethe, and the spiritual reflections of Emerson and Thoreau. This lasting impact highlights a continuous fascination with Saadi's clear moral vision and universal humanism.

Rather than being viewed merely as an Oriental curiosity, Saadi stands out as a moral counterpart across civilisations—a writer whose parables inspire readers to confront injustice, foster humility, and accept the fleeting nature of life. His works not only captivated audiences but were also woven into the moral and literary frameworks of the West. Each writer approached him uniquely: La Fontaine drew inspiration from his fables, Goethe regarded him as a poetic peer, and Emerson held him up as a guide for universal ethical conduct.

The ongoing relevance of Saadi's work solidifies his position within the ever-evolving canon of world literature. As theorist David Damrosch points out, a literary piece achieves the status of world literature not only through translation but also by acquiring new meanings in various contexts. Saadi exemplifies this phenomenon, as his ethical stories, rooted in Persian Sufi wisdom and Islamic teachings, have been reinterpreted to resonate with Enlightenment rationalism, Romantic introspection, and American Transcendentalist ideals. Instead of being merely preserved, Saadi's narratives have been reshaped to address the philosophical, spiritual, and ethical needs of readers far removed from their Persian roots.

His voice has shown remarkable adaptability while remaining firmly grounded in timeless insights. The clarity of his moral reasoning transcends boundaries, allowing his wisdom to resonate across both centuries and continents. In this light, Saadi is more than just a celebrated Persian poet; he is an active participant in the global literary conversation. His philosophical musings and moral visions continue to inspire new ethical interpretations in our interconnected world today.

Works Cited:

- Azar, Ismail Amir. *Adabiyoti Iron dar adabiyoti jahon* (Iranian Literature in World Literature). Tehran, 1387.
- Dalayrac, Nicolas-Marie, ed. *Gulistan, ou le Hulla de Samarcande: Opéra en Trois Actes*. Forgotten Books, 24 Aug. 2018.
- Damrosch, David. "What Is World Literature?" Princeton UP, 2003.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Early Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1899. *Emerson Central*, <https://emersoncentral.com/texts/poems/saadi/>.
- Emerson, R.W. Preface. *The Gulistan or Rose Garden by Musle-Huddeen Sheik Saadi of Shiraz*, translated by Francis Gladwin, Cambridge UP, 1865. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/TheGulistanOrRoseGardenByMusle-huddeenSheikSaadiOfShiraz-FrancisGladwin>.
- Emerson, E.W., and Waldo E.F., editors. *Journal of Ralph Waldo Emerson with Annotations*. Boston, 1910.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *West-Eastern Divan: In Twelve Books*. Translated by Edward Dowden, London, 1980.
- Hadidi, Javad. *De Sa'di Aragon*. Tehran, 1999.
- Hugo, Victor. *Poems*. E-book ed., Project Gutenberg, Aug. 2005. *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8775/8775-h/8775-h.htm>.
- Katouzian, Homa. *Sa'di. The Poet of Life, Love, and Compassion*. Oneworld Publications, 2012.
- La Fontaine, Jean de. *The Fables of La Fontaine*. Translated by Elizur Wright, e-book ed. Project Gutenberg, 1 Sept. 2014. *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7241/7241-h/7241-h.htm>.

- Mukhtor, Shokir. *Adabiyoti Tojik dar Fransiya* (Tajik Literature in France). Dushanbe, 1985.
- Nicholson, Reynold Alleyne. *Translations of Eastern poetry and prose*. Cambridge UP, 1922.
- Rasul Behnam and Mohammad Ali Ziaei. "A Study of the Effect of European Literature From Persian Literature." *Journal of College of Basic Education*, no.14, 2018, pp.285-94. *Becj*, <https://becj-iq.org/journal/uploads/A%20Study%20of%20the%20Effect%20of%20European%20Literature%20From%20Persian%20Literature.pdf>.
- Saadi Shirazi. *Bustan (The Orchard)*. E-book. *Sattorcom*, <https://www.sattor.com/index.html>.
- Saadi Shirazi. *Gulistan (The Gulistan or Rose Garden)*. E-book. *Sattorcom*, <https://www.sattor.com/index.html>.
- Saadi Shirazi. *Gulistan (The Gulistan or Rose Garden)*. Translated by Francis Gladwin, Cambridge UP, 1865. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/TheGulistanOrRoseGardenByMusle-huddeenSheikSaadiOfShiraz-FrancisGladwin>.
- Said Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.
- St. Lambert, Jean François de. *The Season*. Didot, 1795.
- Thoreau, Henry D. *Walden*. T.Y. Crowell and Company, 1899. *Internet Archive*, <https://ia800208.us.archive.org/6/items/cu31924021445741/cu31924021445741.pdf>.
- Voltaire. *Zadig And Other Tales*. E-book. *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.96099/page/n105/mode/2up>.