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### SA<sup>°</sup>DĪ — A MISOGYNIST?

Sa<sup>°</sup>dī is often described as a misogynous writer; e.g. in his recent monograph on Sa<sup>°</sup>dī<sup>1</sup>, John D. Yohannan repeats this view several times<sup>2</sup>, taking it for granted. Somewhat less explicit in her verdict is M. Southgate<sup>3</sup>, but even she does not question the underlying misogynous character of Sa<sup>°</sup>dī<sup>4</sup>. A lexical definition of 'misogynic/misogynous' is 'having or showing a hatred and distrust of women'<sup>5</sup>. Now, the question is: is Sa<sup>°</sup>dī really a misogynist in this sense<sup>6</sup>?

Before undertaking a closer scrutiny of this question we must make one preliminary remark: owing to scarcity of reliable biographical material it is impossible to study the attitudes of the "real", historical Sa<sup>°</sup>dī of Shiraz. We must limit ourselves in this (as well as in any other) study to the Author Sa<sup>°</sup>dī, whose attitudes may or may not be similar to or identical with those of the historical Sa<sup>°</sup>dī<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, it is convenient to limit such studies to the Būstān and the Golestān<sup>8</sup> and to leave aside his ghazals and qaṣīdas,

<sup>1</sup> The Poet Sa'di. A Persian Humanist. *Persian Studies Series* 11, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> "...Sa'di's imperfect sympathy with the opposite sex..." (p. 29); "...Sa'di's own misogynistic view..." (p. 44); "...with characteristic misogyny..." (p. 83).

<sup>3</sup> Men, Women, and Boys: Love and Sex in the Works of SA'DI, *Iranian Studies* 17, 1984, pp. 413-452.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. "the low regard for women observed in Sa'di's work is typical of his time" (p. 417); "...his (i.e. Sa'di's) negative view of women is often expressed casually..." (p. 421); "Sa'di's low regard for women..." (p. 422).

<sup>5</sup> Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, 1976, s.v. 'misogynic/ -ynous', which also cites an example of the use of this word: "a - writer who portrays *all* women as scheming and selfish" (emphasis mine). Cf. also Grand Dictionnaire encyclopédique Larousse, 1984, s.v. 'misogyne': "se dit de qqn qui éprouve du mépris pour les femmes".

<sup>6</sup> Probably no-one using the word 'misogynist' of Sa<sup>°</sup>dī has the psychopathological meaning of the word in mind, so we can leave it without discussion as irrelevant.

<sup>7</sup> Note also that Sa<sup>°</sup>dī, as an author, sometimes seems to take equal delight in juxtaposing two diametrically opposed attitudes, and is in this respect close to his Arabian precursors such as al-Ġāhiz. - It is regrettable that neither the question whether the misogynous statements in the works of this or that author reflect his personal opinions or not, nor the relative value and meaning of contradictory statements about women in the works of this or that poet, is sufficiently taken into account in most studies on these subjects. See also the cautionary remark of J. C. Bürgel, Love, Lust, and Longing: Eroticism in Early Islam as Reflected in Literary Sources, in: Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot (ed.), *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam, Sixth Giorgio Levi della Vida Biennial Conference, 1979* (cited later in this paper as *Society and the Sexes*), p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> In this article I have used the edition of M. A. Forūghī, *Kollīyāt-e Sa<sup>°</sup>dī*, Teheran 1363 A.H.Š. (abbreviating B for Būstān and G for Golestān), and cited the translations of G. M. Wickens, *Morals Pointed and Tales Adorned, Persian Heritage Series*, Toronto 1974 for Būstān (abbreviated W; the line and tale numbering are taken from W), and E. Rehatsek, *The Gulistan or Rose Garden of Sa<sup>°</sup>dī*, edited by

the themes of which are highly conventional<sup>9</sup> and tell us very little about the attitudes of Sa<sup>c</sup>dī himself<sup>10</sup>.

The view of Sa<sup>c</sup>dī as a misogynist is probably often based on the middle part of Tale 128 of the Būstān (lines 3197-3220)<sup>11</sup>, where Sa<sup>c</sup>dī describes bad wives and their tyranny and in the end advises:

Take a new wife, friend, with every new spring,  
For last year's calendar serves no purpose!

(W p. 193 = G p. 356)

This passage, quoted out of context, is indeed misogynous, but when the context is taken into consideration it somewhat loses weight as an argument for Sa<sup>c</sup>dī's general misogyny: in the preceding lines (3187-3196) Sa<sup>c</sup>dī has been exuberantly eulogizing the good wife, e.g.

A goodly wife, obedient and pious  
will turn a poor man to an emperor

(W p. 192 = B p. 355)

and

Though you know grief throughout your day, grieve not  
When she who will relieve your grief lies nightly in your arms;  
When a man's house flourishes and his bedfellow's friendly,  
God's glance in mercy lies upon him.

(W p. 192 = B p. 355)

And in the lines following the description of bad wives (3221-3226) Sa<sup>c</sup>dī advises that  
If you've derived pleasure from a rose-bush  
It's only fair you bear the burden of its thorns

(W p. 194 = B p. 356)

Thus, the middle part is to be taken for just what it appears to be: a description of bad wives, not women in general.

Another frequently quoted tale is Golestān II 32, which is often taken as autobiographical. It tells how Sa<sup>c</sup>dī became a prisoner of the Franks and was ransomed by an emir of Aleppo, who then gave his daughter to Sa<sup>c</sup>dī as a wife, and

After some time had elapsed, she turned out to be ill-humoured, quarrelsome, disobedient, abusive in her tongue and embittering my life:

A bad wife in a good man's house  
Is his hell in this world already.  
Alas for a bad consort, alas!

Preserve us, O Lord, from the punishment of fire. (R pp. 134-135 = G p. 88)

W. G. Archer, London 1964 for Golestān (abbreviated R; the numbering of the stories is taken from R).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. also M. Southgate, p. 416.

<sup>10</sup> The indecent Hazliyāt (Khabīthāt) is here left without discussion; as it is pornographic in nature its stories can not be supposed to give anything but a degrading picture of women. — Contrary to M. Southgate (p. 413 and p. 415), it should be noted that the Hazliyāt are not omitted from *all* versions of the Forūghī edition, even though they are printed in a somewhat mutilated form: the indecent words are abbreviated (thus e.g. the edition printed in Teheran 1341 A.H.Š.).

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Yohannan, p. 44, and Southgate, pp. 423-424.

The story ends with a witticism by Saʿdī. The woman in this story is almost like an example of the bad wife described in the *Būstān*, and the story itself claims no more general validity than the passage of *Būstān* cited above.

Other censorious judgments on women are more difficult to find, and they can almost always be paralleled by respective favourable judgments. Saʿdī often states that women are not as brave as men (W p. 44 (male and female lions), 62 (thrice), 63, 88 etc.; R p. 76 etc.), but this theme is never elaborated and it is a highly conventional motif<sup>12</sup>, often used simply as a stock figure of speech. This attitude is contradicted, in a way, by Tale 110 of the *Būstān*, where a father loses courage when thinking of where he can find food for his infant,

But when that man, resourceless, spoke thus before his consort,  
See how manfully the woman spoke to him

(W p. 172 = B p. 338)

and she assured him that

He Who gives teeth, The Same will give bread

(W p. 172 = B p. 338)<sup>13</sup>

The slave-girl of Tale 16 of the *Būstān* shows even more courage when she rebukes the Caliph Ma'mūn for his bad breath.

The mother-in-law is scorned in *Golestān* V 15 (R p. 193 = G p. 138), a very common theme in every literary tradition, and in *Golestān* VIII, Maxim 33, it is said that "To consult women brings on ruin" (R p. 248 = G p. 180)<sup>14</sup>. In the same chapter, Maxim 39 it is said that

Intellect may become captive to lust like a weak man in the hands of an artful woman

(R p. 251 = G p. 182)

This, too, is a conventional theme in Islamic (as well as in Medieval European) literature.

In Tale 23 of the *Būstān* a woman says to her husband:

Buy no more bread from the street-corner grocer,  
But repair to the wheat-sellers' market,  
For this one wheat displays, but barley sells!

(W p. 76 = B p. 259)

Her husband refuses to do so, grounding his refusal on the duty of generosity (or solidarity):

His hopes on us, a stall he took in this locality:  
Human it would not be to take his profit away from him!

(W p. 76 = B p. 259)

Here, the woman is not blamed; rather, she is depicted as a down-to-earth character

<sup>12</sup> Which could easily be paralleled by examples from almost any literary tradition, eastern or western.

<sup>13</sup> Yohannan mentions this passage but comments that "a woman is *surprisingly* cast in the role of the noble advocate of contentment" (p. 41; emphasis mine).

<sup>14</sup> A very popular saying in Arabic and Persian literature. In Arabic it is used both as a proverb and as a ḥadīth (jāʿatu n-nisāʾi/l-marʾati nadāma 'to obey women leads to regret'). Cf. also the ḥadīth šāwirūhunna wa-khālifūhunna fa-'inna fi khilāfihinna l-barakah 'Ask the advice of women, and then act contrary to it for therein lies blessing' (see e.g. Ibn Qayyim al-Gawziya, Kitāb 'akhbār an-nisā', ed. Nizār Riḍā, Bayrūt 1985, p. 145).

worrying about her family's welfare<sup>15</sup>.

The untimely kindness of a woman, who pities wasps in her house, forms the subject matter of Tale 42 of the *Būstān*, but this is not seen as a characteristic feature of women: in several maxims of Chapter VIII of the *Golestān* (and elsewhere) male characters are warned against it.

These seem to be the main instances of adverse judgment on women in the *Būstān* and the *Golestān*<sup>16</sup>. Even if we take these passages alone, Sa<sup>ʿ</sup>dī does not deserve the reputation of a misogynous writer: a handful of highly conventional reproaches of women<sup>17</sup>, which are never elaborated, and two longer passages on the characteristics of bad wives — not wives in general — in the nearly 400 pages of Sa<sup>ʿ</sup>dī's two main works! When we take into account the frequent passages which show women in a favourable light, it becomes even clearer that Sa<sup>ʿ</sup>dī's fame as a misogynous writer who hates the whole of womankind is undeserved.

One category of women which Sa<sup>ʿ</sup>dī never criticizes is mothers<sup>18</sup>: they are always depicted as tender and loving towards their children (see e.g. W pp. 77, 161 (baby-camel and its mother), 172 (cited above)). The duty of children, even as adults, to love and respect their mothers is explicitly stated in the prologue to Chapter 8 of the *Būstān* ('On Gratitude for Good Estate'), where the themes of the duty of gratitude towards God and towards one's mother are given approximately the same number of lines. Of mothers it is said that

The well-beloved mother's lap and bosom  
Are Paradise, her breasts a stream of milk therein

(W p. 205 = B p. 366)

and

And while the child its teeth sinks in the mother's blood  
Affection is compounded in her for her own bloodsucker.

(W p. 205 = B p. 366)

These general statements are exemplified immediately after the prologue in Tale 133,

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion, see the Excursus.

<sup>16</sup> Southgate (p. 422) remarks that "The woman's feelings and responses are not dwelled upon in the tale (i.e. Chapter I, Story 40 of the *Gulistān*; R pp. 111-112 = G pp. 68-69); they are not an issue at all" when discussing the story where the king gives a reluctant Chinese slave-girl to a negro slave, whose formidableness and stench are amply described. Southgate's remark is undoubtedly correct, but it is to be remembered that stories about slave-girls given as a present to somebody are a topos in Islamic literature, and that here the focus is definitely not on the girl, who is an extremely flat character, but on the king, whose rashness is shown to lead him to act in a foolish way. — Sa<sup>ʿ</sup>dī's works abound in background characters, whose fate is not pitied, and whose feelings "are not an issue at all"; thus it is but natural that one of them should happen to be a woman.

<sup>17</sup> Note that conventional misogynous passages of this kind can easily be found in almost every example of Islamic literature, and they are even sanctified by the Qur<sup>ʿ</sup>ān and the ḥadīths. The Arabic adab-monographs dealing with women, or the respective chapters in adab-anthologies always contain this kind of ḥadīths and maxims page after page (cf. e.g. Kitāb 'akhbār an-nisā' (cited in Note 14), Ibn Qutayba, 'Uyūn al-'akhbār, and al-'Ibšīhī, al-Mustaṭraf). No less misogynous is e.g. the attitude of popular fables in 20th-century Iran, see U. Marzolph, *Typologie des persischen Volksmärchens, Beirut Texte und Studien* 31, Beirut 1984, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Which is admitted also by Yohannan ("Motherhood is as sacred to Sa'di as to his American readers", p. 81), and by Southgate, p. 423.

which is paralleled by Golestān VI 6<sup>19</sup>. In both tales a son hurts his mother, who weeps and reminds him of the time when he was a helpless infant in her arms. In both cases the ingratitude of the son is severely, though implicitly, criticized by the author whose sympathy lies with the mothers. In the Būstān there can be absolutely no doubt about the opinions of the author, as he places the story immediately after the prologue of the chapter dealing with the duty of gratitude<sup>20</sup>.

The courageous behaviour of some women has already been mentioned (see above). Tale 35 of the Būstān tells of the nobility and courage of the daughter of Ḥāṭim Ṭāī, who, after having been pardoned, sees that all other members of her tribe are being executed, and insists on being executed with them.

The love of a bride for her unloving bridegroom is used as a simile for pure mystical love in Tale 52 of the Būstān. Even in the stories of young wives married to old men, Saʿdī sympathizes with the wives (Golestān VI, Stories 8, 9, and less clearly, 2): in Story 8, an old man refuses to marry a young girl:

I being an old man and unwilling to associate with an old woman, how could a young one conceive friendship for me who am aged?

(R p. 211 = G p. 152)

This is seen as a natural thing. This view is more explicitly stated in the next story, which tells of an impotent old man who has married a young girl, who, unsatisfied, becomes quarrelsome. The personal opinion of the author is told in the last lines:

...and Saʿdī said:

'After all this reproach and villainy the fault is not the girl's.

Thou whose hand trembles, how canst thou bore a Jewel?'<sup>21</sup>

(R p. 211 = G p. 152)

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<sup>19</sup> The passage in the Golestān (R p. 210 = G p. 151) is told as autobiographical, whereas the tale of the Būstān is told in the third person: one of the healthy reminders that Saʿdī's "autobiographical" passages may be simply fictitious stories narrated in the first person singular for artistic reasons.

<sup>20</sup> It is very odd that Yohannan sees the tale of Golestān as an example of Saʿdī's misogyny: "He (i.e. Saʿdī) may..., with characteristic misogyny, malign the mother, who gave him birth" (p. 83). Even if the passage is taken as autobiographical, and even if the parallel of the Būstān is left outside the discussion, the story of the Golestān does not present Saʿdī as a misogynist; the behaviour of the son is demonstrably criticized by Saʿdī:

*In the folly of youth* I one day shouted at my mother who then sat down with a grieved heart in a corner and said weeping: 'Hast thou forgotten thy infancy that thou art harsh towards me?'

(R p. 210 = G p. 151; emphasis mine)

Shouting at one's mother "in the folly of youth" and later repenting of it, is surely not a sign of misogyny!

<sup>21</sup> A sexual pun on the girl's name. Note also that the girl's passion for the black slave in Tale 119 of the Būstān (a frequent motif in Arabic erotic and popular literature, cf. e.g. *The Perfumed Garden of the Shaykh Nefzawī (an-Nafzāwī)*, translated by Sir Richard Burton, and the *Alf Layla wa-Layla*) is not criticized in the story; the passer-by who disturbs the love-scene, learns in the end not to poke his nose into other people's affairs. — I cannot agree with Southgate, who sees this anecdote as "stressing the inappropriateness of such passion" (Note 19, p. 442).

In the light of this closer examination of the *Būstān* and the *Golestān* I cannot agree with Yohannan, Southgate and others who claim that Sa<sup>°</sup>dī was a misogynous writer: his attitude towards women is as varied as it is towards his male characters<sup>22</sup>; sometimes women are blamed, sometimes (more frequently) praised<sup>23</sup>. It is true that women play a subordinate and secondary rôle in the works of Sa<sup>°</sup>dī, but this is only natural, since in the Islamic literary tradition, as well as in the real world, home (and especially the wife) is not regarded as a subject fit to be discussed publicly, and as Mediæval Islamic society was dominated by men, it is evident that male figures are also prone to dominate the world of fiction. To my mind, Sa<sup>°</sup>dī, who lived in the 13th century Islamic world and its cultural atmosphere, which was suspicious of, if not hostile to women<sup>24</sup>, seems to show surprisingly little "hatred and distrust of women".

#### Excursus: Sa<sup>°</sup>dī, Marriage, and Homosexual Love

According to the "autobiographical"<sup>25</sup> material in the *Būstān* and the *Golestān* Sa<sup>°</sup>dī is believed<sup>26</sup> to have married at least twice (see W p. 239: Sa<sup>°</sup>dī loses a child in *Şan<sup>°</sup>ā*; and R pp. 134-135: Sa<sup>°</sup>dī is married in Damascus). Be that as it may<sup>27</sup>, in these works Sa<sup>°</sup>dī often criticizes marriage. In the *Būstān*, he describes the burden of a man married to a bad wife (W pp. 192-193; the "misogynous" passage discussed above), but more frequently his suspicious attitude towards marriage is caused by his fear of everyday worries that marriage and children bring<sup>28</sup>. The (autobiographical? — *caveat lector!*) motif of a pious and/or learned man burdened by worrying about how to obtain daily bread for his children is more than frequent in both works<sup>29</sup>. In these passages women are shown as down-to-earth characters, whose loyalty to their children and husband exceeds their solidarity with fellow-Muslims (e.g. W p. 76), and who are not ready to adhere to the ideal of *qanā<sup>°</sup>at* 'contentment' when their children are hungry.

Sa<sup>°</sup>dī's attitude towards marriage has nothing to do with his (asserted) predilection for homosexual love<sup>30</sup>. When homosexual love is contrasted with marriage, Sa<sup>°</sup>dī gives

<sup>22</sup> The list of male characters towards whom Sa<sup>°</sup>dī has the same ambivalent attitude includes kings, viziers, beggars, dervishes, young boys, youths, old men etc. etc.

<sup>23</sup> Similarly the characterization of Lady Macbeth and two of the daughters of King Lear does not make Shakespeare a misogynist; in most literary works of any length one finds sympathetic and unsympathetic characterization of women side by side.

<sup>24</sup> For collections of misogynous passages in Persian literature, see e.g. J. C. Bürgel, pp. 109-114; K. Timm & S. Aalami, *Die muslimische Frau zwischen Tradition und Fortschritt, Veröff. des Museums für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig*, Heft 29, 1976, pp. 223-224, and the article of Southgate cited above, Note 3.

<sup>25</sup> See above, Note 19.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. by H. Massé, *Essai sur le poète Saadi*, Paris 1919, pp. 27-28 and 58-60.

<sup>27</sup> At least the story of losing a child in *Şan<sup>°</sup>ā* gives an authentic impression - if one may indulge in the sin of an 'impressionistic' method.

<sup>28</sup> A very common attitude in Sufi literature, see e.g. James A. Bellamy, *Sex and Society in Islamic Popular Literature*, in: *Society and the Sexes*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>29</sup> See e.g. W pp. 76, 77, 159, 172; R pp. 90, 135, 153, 209-210.

<sup>30</sup> Which seems to me to be a literary convention rather than a personal commitment. Without further dealing with this point in this article, it is perhaps useful to draw the reader's attention to the fact that whereas homoerotic love (Platonic *paidierastia*) is idealized, its physical counterpart, homosexual love (in a modern sense) is usually criticized. — Cf. also Southgate, pp. 428-438 for collection of passages dealing with homosexuality in Persian literature.

as his opinion:

The house-uprooting witness to beauty will make a desolation for you:  
 Go, cause your house to flourish with a wife;  
 A man should not indulge his fancy with a rose  
 Who has a different nightingale at every dawning;  
 While if at every gathering he makes himself a candle,  
 Don't hang around him longer like a moth!  
 A goodly wife, of pleasant temper, well decked out -  
 How should she resemble an ignorant upstart-youth?  
 On her, as on a rose-bud, breathe the breath of loyal affection,  
 For roselike at a smile she'll fall upon your neck;  
 Not so, that twisted child, all flippant in his beauty,  
 Whom even stones can't break — as though he were bdellium;  
 See him not as heart enchanting, like the ḥūr of Paradise,  
 For he on the reverse side is ugly as a ghoul;  
 Though you may kiss his feet, he'll give you no regard:  
 Though you be dust before him, no gratitude he'll show you.

(W pp. 195-196 = B p. 358)

Cf. the Contention of Saʿdī with a Disputant concerning Wealth and Poverty (R pp. 228-229 = G pp. 166-167), where marriage is preferred to homosexual love.

If Saʿdī criticizes marriage, it is because it prevents man from striving with all his energy towards God in the Sufi Path, not because it involves a heterosexual relationship.

