Life and Works of Shaikh Sa'di Sheerazi
Shiraz, capital of the southern province of Fars which supplied the west with that name Persia by which Iran is commonly designated, escaped the devastations of the Mongol incursion and under the Salghurid Atabegs enjoyed comparative peace and prosperity through the tumultuous years of the thirteenth century, a tranquility purchased by voluntary surrender in 1256 to the courage of Islam. The city, which had already produced a goodly crop of scholars and divines, was now to become the centre of a brilliant literary movement that would give to Persia two of her greatest poets. The writing of literary history imposes an obligation, all too often irksome, to observe a strict economy of words and frequently to dismiss in three or four paragraphs authors whose achievements entitle them to less cavalier treatment. It is proposed now to relax this harsh rule and to devote separate chapters to a chosen few of Persia's most outstanding writers; it is just that the first to claim this indulgence should be Sa'di of Shiraz.1

The lifetime of Saadi (also known by the name: Mosleh al-Din Saadi Shirazi) falls in a period of major political and social change in Iran and the whole of the Middle East (the decline of the Abbasid Empire with the invasion and subsequent wanton destruction by the Mongols). As a result of this, little is known about his life apart from what he wrote in his "so called " autobiographical works.

One of his nicest autobiographical stories, in the Golestan, tells the story of his release from

slavery:

... He was imprisoned by the Crusaders and had to dig trenches in Tripoli until a Muslim merchant bought and freed him; but then his previous form of slavery was replaced by another, since he had to marry his benefactor's daughter....

What we know for sure is that he was born in Shiraz in the late 12th century AD (this is even questioned by some scholars who believe he was born in 1210) and began life as a student of the Koran, which he later exchanged for Sufism. During his life he travelled widely and returned to his native town some time around 1256. One usually assumes that Saadi travelled for some thirty years, and it was his experiences and his gift of acute observation that made him such a wonderful story teller.

Before embarking on this brief note, let us be clear on the fact that there exist only a few documents that truly address Sa'dis life directly. In other words, except for the introductory notes where the poet refers to his plans for the composition of the volume, his design for inclusion of stories and his persuasive words for the benefit of his patron and audience, the wealth of information provided by the narrator of Gulistan, might not be autobiographical. This statement is necessary for three reasons. First it clarifies the uncertainty of the dates of birth and death of the poet; secondly, it points to a lack of definite knowledge regarding the length of time the author devoted to travel; and thirdly, it points to the fact that we know little about his activities during his retirement which spans
from 1259 to 1292 and beyond. As things stand, Sa'di could have lived anywhere between 90 and 108 years, traveled of some 20 to 30 years, and rested for a decade or more, something not expected of an energetic man like Sa'di.2

Shaikh Sa'di is not only one of the most honourable Iranians, but is also one of the greatest writers of the world. Among the writers in the Persian Language, there are only one or two who may be compared to him. From among the writers of other nations, both ancient and modern, only a few may equal him. In Iran, about his fame is rarely matched, and both the intelligents and the common man are familiar with his works. If he is not known by the common people of outside Iran, but the scholars have recognised his greatness. This is how the eminent Iranian Literary critic Mohammad Ali Foroughi eulogises the distinguished poet, Philosopher and sage. 3

It is confidently asserted by many Persian biographers that Sa'di was born in 1184; those who entertain a different opinion agree nevertheless upon 1185. European scholars have until very recently accepted these alternatives as fixing a date circa 1184 for Sa'di's birth. There appear to be reasonably good grounds for believing the widespread report that he died in 1292; but it is not only on account of the implication of unusual longevity that modern investigators have looked again into the traditional nativity. It was 'Abd al-'Azim Khan Garakani who first argued cogently for the rejection of the established view; his representations have been conceded as convincing by a number of later

2. wisdom of sadi P - VII
authorities including 'Abbas Iqbal, Bahar and Shafaq. Two internal reasons have always been offered in defence of the old chronology. In chapter IX of the Bustan Sa'di writes:

O you whose life has now reached to seventy,

perhaps you were asleep while it went with the wind.

Now, it is certain that the Bustan was completed in the 1257; therefore the poet, allowing for lunar reckoning, must have been born not later than 1189. But this is to assume that Sa'di is here soliloquizing, whereas it is his practice throughout the Bustan to address in the second person the reader to whom the particular section is thought apposite; and as the theme of chapter IX is penitence, what is more natural than that the poet should here direct his appeal to the elderly sinner?

The second internal piece of evidence, alleged is that in anecdote 20 of book II of the Gulistan Sa'di claims to have received certain instruction from Abu'l-Faraj Ibn al-Jauzi, and the person generally known by that name is famous polygraph who died in 1200. Garakani however suggests that Sibt Ibn al-Jauzi was here intended, and his death occurred in 1257; while 'Abbas Iqbal puts forward another Abu'l-Faraj Ibn al-Jauzi, a son of Sibt Ibn al-Jauzi, who perished with his father and brothers during the Mongol massacre of Baghdad.
In any case it has long been recognized that Sa'di's writings afford a very insecure basis for the reconstruction of his biography. 'In the short stories of Gulistan recollectoins Bustan,' writes J.H. Kramers, 'there occur many personal recollectins of the author. In his monograph on Sa'di, Masse has tried to restore a biography based on those information. But he seems to have trusted Sa'di's veracity too much. The truth of many of these stories has been doubted before (Barbier de Meynard, Ruckert) and Sa'di himself declares that whoever has been much about in the world, may lie a great deal.' There is also the stubborn fact that in his preface to the Gulistan, undoubtedly comleted in 1258 Sa'di (as trans lated by R.A Nicholson ) writes: 'One evening I was thinking over bygone days and regretting a life wasted in foolish ways, piercing the stone of my heart with the diamond of tears, and reciting these verses which the occasion the commanded to mine ears:

Each moment steals a breath of life once more,

And few, I see, are now remaining o'er.

What! Fifty years by lethargy possessed!

Yet mayst thou realize the fleeting rest...

If Sa'di is here intending to imply – and the context appears to point in this direction – that his own age at writing was about fifty, then his birth must have taken place about the year 1208.

The equally vexed problem of Sa'di's nomenclature is not unconnected with the problem of his nativity. Even his personal names create difficulty, but it must suffice here to quote the opinion of
Bahar, which others share, that he was called Abu 'Abd Allah Musharrif (or Musharrif al- Din) ibn Muslih.

Shaiikh Sa'\textsuperscript{di} was descendend from Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. His father was a religious man and of a religious persuasion. When Sa'\textsuperscript{di} was about twelve years old, his father passed away and the family came under the protection of Sa'\textsuperscript{di}'s uncle who had a small shop in Shiraz. With the help of his uncle, Sa'\textsuperscript{di} complete his early education in Shiraz. The end of his elementary education coincides roughly with the invasion of Central Asia by Chingiz Khan and the devastation of Khujand Samarqand, and Bukhara, the Iranian peoples' most cherished cultural centers.


The accepted version states that he was so called after the famous Atabeg of Fars, Abu Shuja'
Sa'd ibn Zangi, who died in 1226. It would not be impossible, though most unlikely, that a stripling in
his teens should have so far advanced in royal favour as to be permitted to style by his name. 'Abbas
Iqbal however, pointing out that the Gulistan is dedicated to Sa'd ibn Zangi's grandson, also named
Sa'd, suggests that it was from him that the poet derived his nom de plume. This conjecture is
reinforced by the striking fact that in all his writings Sa'di never composed a single verse in honour of
Sa'd ibn Zangi.

Sa'di tells us in the Bustan that he was orphaned at an early age:

Full well I know the pains that orphans bear,

For as a child I lost my father's care.

There seems to be no reason to doubt this statement. It may also be presumed true that after
receiving his education in Shiraz he went to Baghdad, perhaps to escape from the political turmoil
which followed the death of Sa'd ibn Zangi, and there he studied Arabic language, Arab literature,
hadith, the Qur'an, and commentaries on the holy book at the Nizamiya Academy. To accept that he
became a disciple of 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani the Sufi, 'with whom,' says T.W. Haig, 'he made the
pilgrimage to Mecca,' would be to allow an extraordinary anachronism, for 'Abd al-Qadir died in 1166. Less inherent improbability attaches to Sa'di's claim to have met the equally eminent mystic Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (d. 1234),6 (Sa'di was a disciple of the Sufi master Sheikh Shahabud-Din Sahrawardi.) and it has been suggested that he may also have encountered Jalal al-Din Rumi some time during his extensive travels. For after completing his studies Sa'di fared very far indeed afield, to judge by the statements of an autobiographical character which punctuate his discourse. Tale 31 of Book II of the Gulistan makes out that he was for a time prisoner of the Crusaders: Masse dates this episode in the year 1221, but Garakani puts it eight years later. 7

7. Classical Persian Literature, P189
I had grown weary of the society of my Damascus friends, and therefore made my way into the Jerusalem desert, where I enjoyed the companionship of the beasts; until the time came when the Franks made me their prisoner, and kept me with Jews in a trench at Tripoli digging clay. One of the leading citizens of Aleppo, with whom I had been formerly acquainted, chancing to pass by, recognized me and said, "Sirrah, what manner of life is this?" I said, "What can I say?"

8. Kulliyat-e-Sa’di PP. 87-88
"I fled from men to mountain and to plain,
For I had nothing from mankind to gain;
How is my case? Regard me in this den,
Where I must sweat with men that are not men.
Better to hang in chains, when friends are there,
Than dwell with strangers in a garden fair."

'He had compassion on my condition, and with ten dinars procured my release from bondage. He took me along with him to Aleppo, and there made me marry his daughter, adding a dowry of a hundred dinars. Some time passed. She was a woman always scowling, disobedient and growling; she began to me plenty of her shrewish tongue, and made life wholly miserable for me.

A bad wife comes with a good man to dwell:

She soon converts his present world to hell.

Beware of evil partnership, beware:

Form hellish torment, Lord, thy servants spare!

'Once in a torrent of abuse she said, "Are you not that man whom my father bought back from the Franks?" I said, "Yes, I am that man whom he bought back from the Frankish chains for ten dinars, and delivered into your bondage for a hundred dinars."' 9

He traveled until 1256, extensively in the Middle East, especially in Siriya, Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and Abyssinia and in the eastern Islamic lands, particularly in Turkistari. In the east, he might have traveled as far as India.

Sa'di's travels coincide with a time when Chingiz Khan (1206-1227) passed the scepter of Mongol power to Ogandai Khan (1221-1241) and when, under Khan Mongke (1251-1258), Batu Khan devastated Rassia and Eastern Europe. In this respect, Sa'di is very much like Marco Polo who traveled in the region from 1271 to 1294. There is a difference, however, between the two. While Marco Polo gravitated to the potentates and the good life, Sa'di mingled with the ordinary survivors of the Mongol holocaust. He sat in remote teahouses late into the night and exchanged views with merchants, farmers, preachers, wayfarers, thieves, and Sufi mendicants. For twenty years or more, he continued the same schedule of preaching, advising, honing his sermons, and polishing them into gems illuminating the wisdom and foibles of his people.

1256 is the date usually assigned for the time when Sa'di's zeal for travel gave in to his desire to document the fruits of his travels. He returned to his home town of Shiraz which, under Atabak Abubakar Sa'd ibn Zangy (1231-1260) was enjoying an era of relative tranquility. Not only was he welcomed to the city but was respected highly by the ruler and enumerated among the greats of the province. In response, Sa'di composed some of his most delightful panegyrics as an initial gesture of
gratitude in praise of the ruling house and placed them at the beginning of his Bustan. Within a year of the composition of Bustan, Sa'di authored another volume which he entitled Gulistan. Dedicated to Sa'd ibn Zangy, the Gulistan (rose garden) is intended to pass to subsequent generations the essence of the Shaykh's sermons. Abbas Iqbal however, pointed out that the Gulistan is dedicated to Sa'd ibn Zangi's grand son, also named Sa'd, suggests that it was from him that the poet derived his nom de plume. This conjecture is reinforced by the striking fact that in all his writings Sa'di never composed a single verse in honour of Sa'd ibn Zangy. The volume consists of a cycle of eight rhymed-prose partitions each interspersed with poetry. The themes discussed include the manners of kings, the morals of dervishes, the preference of as well as youth, old age, and the like.

The volume is melodious in style with a predominance of love in it. It expresses the poet's true emotions in its prose as well as in its exemplary poetry. Furthermore, it is a gold mine for effective use of metaphor displaying mystic love in the guise of earthly love, and is redolent with contempt for priesthood and authority. The first Persian literary contribution to be translated into a Western tongue, the Gulistan was translated by Rahatsk in Banaras in 1888.

Now Sa'di had an equally romantic story to tell of how his new book came to be composed; the version quoted is that dedicated by Francis Gladwin to Marquis Wellesley at Patna in 1806.
'It was season of spring; the air was temperate, and the rose in full bloom. The vestments of the tree resembled the festive garments of fortunate. It was mid-spring, when the nightingales were chanting from the pulpits of the branches; the rose decked with pearly dew, like blushs on the cheek of a chiding mistress. It happened once, that I was benighted in a garden, in company with one of my friends. The spot was delightful, trees intertwined; you would have said that the earth was bedecked with glass spangles, and that the knot of the Pleiades was suspended from the branch of the vine. A garden with a running stream, and trees from whence birds were warbling melodious strains: that filled with tulips of various hues; these loaded with fruits of several kinds. Under the shade of its trees the zephyr had spread the variegated carpet. In the morning, when the desire to return home overcame our inclination for remaining, I saw in his lap a collection of roses, odoriferous herbs, and lyacinths, which he had intended to carry to town. I said, "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 sto be set upon anything that is transitory." He asked, "What course is then to be pursued?" I replied, "I am able to form a book of roses, which will delight the beholders, and gratify those who are present; whose leaves the tyrannic arm of the autumnal blasts can cever affect, nor injure the blossoms of its spring. What benefit will you derive from a basket of
Carry a leaf from my garden; a rose may continue in bloom for five or six days; but this rose's garden will flourish forever. "As soon as I had uttered these words, he flung the flowres from his lap, and laying hold on the skirt of my garment, exclaimed, "When the beneficent promise, they faithfully discharge their engagements," In the course of a few days, two chapters (one on the comforts of society, and the other containing rules for conversation) were written out in my note-book, in a style that may be useful to orators, and improve the skill of letter-writers. In short, whilst the rose was yet in bloom; the book entitled the Rose Garden was finished: but it will be truly perfected on gaining a favorable reception at court, and when it obtains an indulgent perusal from that prince who ray of providential beneficence, the treasury of the age, the refuge of religion, the favorite of Heaven, the mighty arm of the victorious empire, the lamp of the aggrandizer of the faith, Sad, son of Atabuk the great; that potent monarch to whom nations bend the neck; lord paramount of kings of Arabia and Persia; sovereign of land and sea; inheritor of the throne of Solomon, Mozuffuruddeen, may God perpetuate the good fortune of both, and prosper all their righteous undertakings!'

Gladwin's version is not free from error, but it conveys remarkably well, within certain limits, the glittering rhetoric of the original. In this tender evocation of a Persian spring Sa'di compares his Gulistan with a Persian garden, and the comparison is very apt. The eight partitions into which it is divided are planted each with its own cluster of gay and sombre stories, in that seductive intermixture
of rhymed prose and verse which had by now come to be regarded as the prerequisite of elegant composition. In mya Kings and Beggars (a translation of the first two chapters) I have at some length gone into the contents and arrangement of Gulistan, and has enjoyed a vogue in Europe for over three centuries, since Andre du Ryer brought out in 1634 a garbled French paraphrase of about one half, and in 1651 George Gentz published at Amsterdam a creditable edition with a Latin translation of the whole. "The first book that I would recommend," Sir William Jones advised the readers of his Grammar of the Persian Language, "is the Gulistan or Bed of Roses, a work which is highly recommended in the East, and of which there are several translations in Europe." Edward FitzGerald took Jones's counsel when he began the study of Persian, and on January 24, 1859, he wrote to his old friend Elizabeth Cowell: "Tell Cowell I get on famously (as I think) with Sa'di, whom I like much: he is just one of the Writers who can't be seen in a Translation: his merits are not strong enough to bear decanting I think - Certainly Eastwick is wretched in the Verse: and both he and Rose (I know both versions) seem to me on a wrong tack wholly in their Style of rendering the Prose."

Ten years later Ralph Waldo Emerson penned in Concord a preface to the first American edition of Francis Gladwin's translation. Viewed even through the distorting glass of that imperfect version, the Gulistan made a lively impression on the mind of the great essayist. 'At first sight,' he remarks, 'the Oriental rhetoric does not please our Western taste,'

Laila and Majnun

To a certain king of Arabia they were relating the story of the love of Majnun for Laila, and his ensuing insane state, saying: "In spite of his knowledge and wisdom, Majnun has turned his face towards the desert, and abandoned himself to distraction."

The king ordered that they bring Majnun into his presence; and he reproved him, saying: "What have you seen unworthy in the noble nature of man that you should assume the manners of a brute, and forsake the enjoyment of human society?"

Majnun wept and answered:

"Many of my friends reproach me for my love Laila.

Alas! that they could one day see her,

That my excuse might be manifest for me.

Would to God that those who blame me could behold your face, O ravisher of hearts!

That at the sight they, from inadvertency,

Might cut their own fingers instead

Of the orange in their hands."
Then might the truth of the reality bear testimony against the semblance of fiction, what manner of person that was for whose sake you were upbraiding me."

The king resolved that, by viewing in person the charms of Laila, he might be able to judge what her form could be that had caused all this misery. So he ordered her to be brought into his presence. Having searched through the Arab tribes, they discovered her and presented her before the king in the courtyard of his seraglio. He viewed her figure, and beheld a person of a tawny complexion and feeble frame of body. She appeared to him in a contemptible light, inasmuch as the lowest menial in his harem surpassed her in beauty and excelled her in elegance. for you, O king, to contemplate the charms of Laila through the gate of a Majnun's eye, in order that the miracle of such a spectacle might be illustrated to you:

You can have no fellow-feeling for my disorder.

A companion to me must have the same sickness,

That I may sit by him all day, telling my tale;

For rubbing two pieces of dry firewood together

Will make them burn brighter.

Sympathized with my pain.

Tell it, my friends, to those ignorant of love;

Would you could be aware of what wrings my soul!
The anguish of a wound is unknown to the healthy;
We must detail our aches only to a fellow-sufferer.
It were idle to talk of a hornet to him
Who has not yet smarted from its sting.
Till your condition is something like mine,
My state will seem like an idle fable.

Compare not my pain with that of another:
He holds salt in his hand,
I bear it on an open wound."

Majnun, in his sagacity, penetrated what was passing in the royal mind, and said: "It will be necessary
Had that grove of verdant reeds heard the murmursof love that pass through my ear in detail
Of my mistress's story, it would have

Sadi is probably the first Persian poet to have been translated into European languages. A German
version of the Gulistan appeared in 1654.

Sadi's tomb can be seen in the town of Shiraz. Lines from Sadi's poems are still commonly
used in conversations by Iranians today.