

Johnson and Saadi, Two Intimate Strangers

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Abstract

Regarding the curious structural and thematic similarity between Johnson's *Rasselas and Saadi's Golestan* and with respect to numerous references to Persian literature in *Rasselas*, the researcher made a quick research through Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* and Johnson's letters and she discovered that Johnson has shown special interest in Persian culture and literature. This became a motivation for the researcher to carry on an extensive research to find out about the source of this interest and to see if Johnson has been probably influenced by Persian classical writers, especially Saadi.

Therefore, what will follow is the result of the findings based on two hypotheses questions: (1) Has there been any basis for Johnson's specific attention to Persian literature and if there has been any interest in or familiarity with Persian literature, how extensive or profound has it been? (2) With regard to the deep influence of the French Neo-classicists on English Neo-classicists in the 18th century, is there any possibility that, even if Johnson had had no access to the English text of *Golestan*, he had availed himself of the later English translations of Persian poets who had widely been read and appreciated by the learned and the cultivated circles in Europe and especially in France, through third-party translations either in French or Latin? And could this influence have led to his emphatic comments about Persian poetry and have informed the structure, narration and the thematic mode of *Rasselas*?

Key Words: comparative study of *Rasselas* and *Golestan*, Saadi and Johnson, the probable influence of Saadi, Western and Persian Classical writers.

Introduction

What encouraged the researcher to carry out a research project about Dr. Johnson's being possibly influenced by Persian literature and specially by Saadi's *Golestan* in composition of his fictional masterpiece *Rasselas* were the following characteristics of *Rasselas*: The work's oriental mood, its story-within-story structure, despite its apparent consistent narrative structure, its outstanding resemblance to the fables of Saadi in *Golestan* and finally the philosophical and moral standpoints of Johnson and Saadi. After rereading *Rasselas* and concentrating on the advices of Imlac, the teacher and the advisor of the Abissinian prince *Rasselas*, and his attitude toward Persian poetry and literature, the feeling of curious similarity between *Golestan* and *Rasselas* and the motivation towards a thorough investigation about Johnson's probable familiarity with Persian literature, and for that matter with Saadi's *Golestan*, was reinforced. Thus, an attempt was made to collect some data and evidence to verify this feeling (which may be a feeling shared by many of the readers of these two works) that this resemblance is not arbitrary and has probably some documentary basis. Regarding Johnson's authority as the theoretician of English Neo-classicism and Saadi as one of the greatest Persian classical poets, one could have no doubt that a part of this philosophical-moral similarity stems from their classical perspectives which usually direct toward Didacticism.

However, the curiosity aroused was not just due to the similarity between Johnson's and Saadi's moral-philosophical view points, but also due to frequent and reiterated references to the opulence of Persian poetry and literature in Imlac's speeches. The question provoked was whether such references have been randomly used to intensify the oriental mood of the story or whether Johnson has deliberately made such remarks based on his own personal interest and knowledge: Beginning his report of his travels to foreign lands with Persia, Imlac comments on Persian culture thus: ". . . I traveled into Persia, where I saw many remains of ancient magnificence, and

observed many accommodations of life. The Persians are a nation eminently social, and their assemblies afforded me daily opportunities of remaking characters and manners, and of tracing human nature through all its variations” (Johnson 408). Imlac, Johnson’s mouthpiece, also adds that he “read all the poets of Persia and Arabia, and was able to repeat by memory the volumes that are suspended in the mosque of Mecca” (409).

Of course, it was evident at the outset that the researcher would confront difficulties to have access to the related sources since in cases where such influences exist, only the Orientalists acknowledge them, not the literary historians.

Therefore, what will follow is the result of the findings based on two hypotheses in the process of the research: (1) Has there been a basis for Johnson’s specific attention to Persian literature and if there has been any interest in or familiarity with Persian literature, how extensive or profound has it been? (2) With regard to the deep influence of the French Neo-classicists on English Neo-classicists in the 18th century, is there any possibility that, even if Johnson had had no access to the English text of *Golestan*, he had availed himself of the later English translations of Persian poets who had widely been read and appreciated by the learned and the cultivated literary circles in Europe and especially in France, through third-party translations either in French or Latin? And could this influence have led to his emphatic comments about Persian poetry and have informed the structure, narration and the thematic mode of *Rasselas*?

In the process of the research, the present writer came up with noteworthy results which represented this fact that the first feeling about the similarity between *Golestan* and *Rasselas* was not baseless; the evidence indicated that not only was Johnson fascinated by Arabic and Persian literature (which Europeans considered interchangeable) but he also widely studied the translations of Persian poets like Saadi. The so-called similarity between the two works has been so remarkable that it has attracted the

attention of some Persian and English scholars. However, the present project is intended to test and check the authenticity of this sense of similarity, to give it a second thought and to deal with it more consciously and seriously than it has experienced so far. Despite the painstaking process of the research due to the limitation of the sources, the findings were adequately and delightfully rewarding and satisfactory to smoothen the rough path.

Main Discussion: The Probable familiarity of Dr. Samuel Johnson with Persian literature and with *Golestan*

Prior to any search for some vestiges of the influence of Persian literature on Johnson, the journal of James Boswell, Johnson's famous biographer, was consulted: Boswell refers to *Rasselas* as an "oriental tale" (Boswell, *London Journal* 31). In search of any comment about Johnson's interest in Oriental literature, his famous biography written by Boswell was also consulted. In one of his comments about Mediterranean countries and their cultures, he states that "On those shores were the four great Empires of the world: The Assyrian, the Persian, the Grecian, and the Roman.—All our religion, almost all our law, almost all our arts, almost all that sets us above savages, has come to us from the shores of the Mediterranean" (Boswell, *Life of Johnson* 742). Moreover, Boswell quotes one of Johnson's letters to Warren Hastings in which he emphatically demands Hastings to make inquiry into those issues about which the European has neither thought at all or thinks with "deficient intelligence and uncertain conjecture." He also continues his letter with these words that "I shall hope, that *he who once intended to increase the learning of his country by the introduction of Persian language, will examine nicely the traditions and histories of the East; that he will survey the wonders of its ancient edifices. . . ; and that, at his return, we shall know the arts and opinions of a race of men, from whom very little has been hitherto derived*" (Boswell, *Life* 1117-18) [All italics are mine]. One cannot ignore the very similarity between these comments and the comments of Imlac in *Rasselas* which imply his glorification of Persian

literature and language.

Even more interestingly is Yohannan's reference (in his *Persian Poetry in England and America*) to another of Johnson's letters to the same Hastings who was then one of the official authorities in Eastern India (Yohannan 6). In this letter, Johnson encourages and requests Hastings to establish a Chair of Persian literature at Oxford University. When Hastings fails to do so, to console him, Johnson sends him a copy of *Persian Grammar* by William Jones which is imbued with maxims and poems by Persian poets like Hafiz, Khayyam, Molavi and especially Saadi's fables (Yohannan 4-5).

Since Hastings was one major influential British officer in East India in the seventeenth, some historical sources about the influence of Persian literature and civilization on European culture in the 17th and 18th centuries, the age of Johnson, were conferred. Hamid Nayer Nouri in *Iran's Contribution to the World's Civilization* highlights the tremendous impact of Persian literature on European civilization and literature:

Prior to the Crusades, European writers, who invested all their efforts and energy on writing about the deeds of Christian saints and heroes of European legends and had no concept of short stories, dialogues-stories and love or lyrical poems, suddenly confronted with a vast variety of Persian literary genres and forms; such a rich literature incredibly altered and expanded their perspectives about literature. (Nouri 515-16)

Nouri also quotes Professor Gabe, the professor of Arabic literature at London University, who declares in his book, *The Heritage of Islam*, that the people of the West first considered Iranians superior in the military and war affairs, but later upon further inquiry they found out that Iranians were superior in their power of thought and imagination, in literary and philosophical masterpieces as well (78). He also adds "Europeans liked some parts of Oriental literature and translated them into their own language. It is evident that the East opened up new avenues for the Europeans to achieve

the present rank in literature” (76). Furthermore, Nouri quotes professor Arberry who says, “. . . The English subjects who served in East India tried to learn Persian language and thus indirectly became acquainted with rich Persian literature and with Saadi, Hafiz and Khayyam: The English could achieve their political purposes through learning Persian since Persian was the current language all throughout India” (Nouri 158).

Kokab Saffari in her readable book *Persian Legends in 18th Century English Literature* points out to the fact that apparently one of the books which was taught in India for teaching Persian was Saadi’s *Golestan* (193-4) and thus interest in Persian literary works and especially in Saadi became widespread in the whole Europe. Saffari maintains that Saadi, contrary to his other fellow countrymen had the advantage of being quite known from the beginning of the 17th century. In 1636, meaning sixty eight years before the translation of *Thousand and One Night* by Gallan, his *Golestan* was translated by Dorrieh, the first translator of the Holy Quran; the fact that the translation of his work was eleven years prior to the translation of the Holy Quran indicates his reputation and popularity.

Many people contributed to the recognition of Persian works through their translations of Persian masterpieces. One of the people to whom Persian literature is truly indebted is a Dutch figure named Levinus Warner (Nouri 518). In 1651, the first publication of *Golestan* with annotations in a Latin translation took place by George Gentinus in Amsterdam. Meanwhile, Nouri comments about Saadi’s translation into French in his book:

Saadi is the first Persian writer whose work has been translated into French and perhaps the reason why Saadi has been chosen for translation more frequently than other Persian poets is the peculiar proximity between the French taste and mood with those of Saadi; . . . Saadi’s works have been so far more repeatedly employed and adopted than those of other poets. (Nouri 528)

Javad Hadidi in his *The Confrontation of Thoughts* declares the date of

1634 as the date of the first translation of *Golestan* into French; this translation has been the basis for other translations into other European languages and through these latter translations all Europeans came to know Saadi very well. Eventually, “since in that time people were more committed to religious and moral beliefs than today, those acquainted with Saadi benefited a lot from his fables, poems and didactic comments and, imitating him as a model, they made many stories” (158). Therefore, “research in Persian literature through French grew so vastly widespread that although after World War I, English turned into the international language, every scholar familiar only with English language would certainly be deprived of the vast and important existing studies and researches” (Matti 11).

With regard to the above explanations, it should be obvious by now that an English-speaking writer had to be exposed to Saadi’s works only through French translations, and Samuel Johnson, an arduous adherent of the French Neo-classicism, could be no exception in this regard. Thus, the present researcher had to deal first with the influence of Saadi on the French Neo-classical writers and then in turn tackle with the influence of their translations on their English proponents like Dr. Samuel Johnson. Consequently, the approach had to take an indirect course.

Almost in all the sources about the influence of Saadi on European literature, the undeniable influence of Saadi on Voltaire has been stressed. Henry Masse in *A Research on Saadi* quotes Voltaire, who without knowing Persian, had translated one of the works of Saadi and some of the lines of Voltaire’s poetry seem to be the exact literal translations of those of Saadi (Masse 409). Heidar Reghabi in *Saadi and the Philosophy of Life* discusses Voltaire’s unlimited praise of Saadi once *Golestan* was translated into Latin in 1651 (228). The curious and noteworthy point which is the concern and focus of the present study is Boswell’s discussion about the very close similarity between Voltaire’s *Candid* and Johnson’s *Rasselas*, although the purposes seem to be different for Johnson meant to direct human hope

towards “eternal things” (241-2).

Besides the many references to the influence of Saadi’s *Golestan* on Voltaire’s *Candid*, on the one hand, and the similarity between *Rasselas* and *Candid*, on the other, Saffari in her comparative work also points out to this latter resemblance: “*Rasselas*, the most popular work of Johnson was published only a few weeks before *Candid* appeared in print and this simultaneity of publication startled even Johnson himself” (62). Saffari believes that this similarity originates from the closeness of attitude between Persian thinkers and men of letters, on the one hand, and the French ones, on the other. She finally continues that “to this group one should add the British moralists-philosophers of this age particularly Addison, *Johnson* and Goldsmith” (62) [My italics]. Thus Saffari extends the similarity between Saadi and Johnson to the latter’s English contemporaries.

Hadidi in his *From Saadi to Aragon* emphasizes this issue that “the attraction of Indian and Persian stories was so intense that they impressed the greatest writers of the 18th century like Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu; Voltaire highly benefited from *A Thousand and One Night* in making his philosophical stories” (110). In another chapter, Hadidi states that “Saadi of Shiraz with whose appealing speeches the French were quite familiar since 1634 and whom they had imitated in story writing was still one of the dominant influences in the French circles and had influenced writers and thinkers more than ever” (291).

Finally, Geoffrey Tillotson with much certainty deals with the influence of the “Persian tales” on Johnson. He holds the idea that Johnson’s imagination like that of many of the 18th century men of letters inclined towards the Persian legends and fables. Tillotson also refers to the influence of the Persian tales on Johnson’s contemporaries like Pope and Addison and adds that “The Europeans’ familiarity with these tales was through Petis de la Croix’s translations in five volumes which were later translated into English by Ambrose Philips” (Tillotson 534). The first date that Tillotson

has found for Philips' translation has been 1714.

With regard to the above date and other such dates of the translation of Persian works and with respect to the first French and Latin translations of *Golestan* in Europe, which was much before Johnson's composition of *Rasselas*, Johnson's familiarity with these works is very probable; this probability tends towards certainty when in *Rasselas*, Imlac, representative of Johnson, refers to his travels to Iran and enthusiastically compliments on Persian culture and literature, the same enthusiasm which was found to be conspicuous in his letters to Hastings.

The Influence of Johnson's Literary School on his Inclination towards Oriental Works

The probability of Johnson's being influenced by *Golestan* in writing *Rasselas* is augmented when we recall that English Neo-classicism, whose most distinguished figure was Samuel Johnson, was very much influenced by the French Neo-classicists because the French ones were considered the truly loyal followers of Neo-classicism. Since this school was indeed a return to the beliefs and the taste of figures like Horace and Aristotle, its tenets emphasized the instructive and didactic prophecy of literature and maintained the precept that permanence of literature is secured when it is based on Nature and especially human nature. Therefore, evidently the instructive fables of Saadi imbued with sententious maxims corresponded to the emerging Neo-classical doctrine and spirit. For instance, Archer points out to the Aristotelian nature of the 20th story from the seventh section of *Golestan* (Archer 41). With regard to the afore-mentioned popularity of Saadi among the French Neo-classicist thinkers and authors and with respect to Johnson's adherence to the French Neo-classicists, one cannot be heedless of the possibility of Johnson's acquaintance with Saadi's *Golestan* to the extent that in his letter to Hastings he insists on Hasting's enforcing the establishment of a Chair of Persian literature at Oxford University.

Besides, to render this proximity between the attitudes of the 18th century

English Neo-classicists and those of Saadi, who is one of the greatest honors of 13th century Persian literature, one may want to survey the ideas of the scholars and authorities about this matter since this relationship forms the focus of the present study.

Professor Arberry in his *Classical Persian Literature* states that all the attempts made so far suggest that only an 18th century poet could do justice to a 13th century Persian poet (196). He also very explicitly juxtaposes Saadi with Dryden and Pope, the contemporaries of Johnson. Moreover, Arberry verifies his claim by quoting Emerson, the famous American poet and essayist (200). Clinton quotes Emerson who maintains that Saadi presents the events and situations with the same variety and depth of experience that Cardinal de Retz in Paris or Dr. Johnson in London does (Clinton 122). In addition to the above critics, Mary Lascelles declares that “the imaginative Oriental stories can very well correspond to the 18th century imagination (43). Arguing the same point, Yohannan points out to the appeal of Saadi’s *Golestan* to the writers and thinkers of The Age of Reason (18-25).

Perhaps it is due to the same proximity of the literary schools to which Saadi and 18th century writers adhered that Kokab Saffari has keenly made her thorough inquiry into the influence of Persian tales and legends on the poets and the essayists of the 18th century Britain. She concludes her discussion with a reference made to the resemblance between *Golestan* and *Rasselas*:

It is not certain to the writer of this dissertation whether Johnson like Voltaire was familiar with our customs and religious traditions or not; yet, in my opinion, the language of Imlac, *Rasselas*’ teacher resembles that of Saadi. . . . the poet that Johnson describes is the same figure we call Hakim. Johnson says from Imlac’s tongue that the poet ‘must write as the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as a being superior to time and place’ and then he adds that in Iran and Arabia poetry was glorified

as the noblest art and people paid the poet the respect worthy of the angels. This is reminiscent of Nezami Ganjavi's interpretation of the three great poets. (Saffari 61)

Dr. Zarrinkoub in *Neither Eastern, nor Western, Humane* refers to the influence of the oriental stories and of *Golestan* on Western writers. What Zarrinkoub brings up about Saadi's *Golestan* is precisely what a Neo-classicist like Johnson has stressed as the task of a committed poet and author!

[Saadi] intends to describe man and the world the way they are and the world, just like man, as it is, is not void of contradictions and curiosity. But Saadi in the description and visualization of such a world has manifested power and unbelievable skill and the world which he has built up in *Golestan*, although to some extent imaginary, is a genuine picture of the actual world with all its ups and downs and all its wonders. Saadi has not created this world, but he has seen this world and has described it accurately. This is the world of his age: the age of caravans and camels, of virtue and mysticism. This is the world that Saadi "in the farthest part of the world" has observed, has explored and has perceived from all its sides. His *Golestan*, which is the image of such a world, takes its variety of such issues. It is not just flowers and spring and love and youth and wine and the beloved which mystify one in this "paradise"; Thorn and autumn and weakness and oldness and palsy and pain have their own special place. In this world, which is covered under the dust of oblivion, everything is still alive and dynamic. One can see in it both the silence of the desert or the lingering of the camels and the clamor of the quarrels of the caravan of the pilgrims who have jumped at each other in a brawl. . . . (Zarrinkoub 198-9)

What Saadi has recreated in *Golestan* and Zarrinkoub has described in the above is exactly what Johnson has announced as the task and prophecy of a poet:

To a poet nothing is useless. Whatever is beautiful, and whatever is

dreadful, must be familiar to his imagination: he must be conversant with all that is awfully vast or elegantly little. The plants of the garden, the animals of the wood, the minerals of the earth, and meteors of the sky, must all concur to store his mind with inexhaustible variety: for every idea is useful for the inforcement or decoration of moral or religious truth; and he, who knows most, will have most power of diversifying his scenes, and gratifying his reader with remote allusions and unexpected instruction. But the knowledge of nature is only half the task of a poet: he must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition; observe the power of all the passions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of the human mind. ... (Johnson 410)

Imlac in *Rasselas* like Saadi in *Golestan* claims that he has explored the whole world and presents his observation with fidelity to the facts. It is evident how *Golestan* could be appealing to a person who expresses the above ideas. In *Golestan*, Saadi has achieved what is the recapitulation and manifestation of a classical writer's commitment—the same commitment which Imlac so zealously highlights in *Rasselas*.

Conclusion

Finally, after an attempt was made to have further access to the sources which explicitly deal with the influence of Persian literature and of Saadi on Johnson, the writer could find an invaluable essay by Richard Eversole. Eversole, also out of curiosity about the Oriental mode of *Rasselas*, has done a research about the influence of Eastern literature, i.e. Islamic and Persian literature on Samuel Johnson (Eversole 155-70). In the course of his research, Eversole points out to Johnson's comment addressed to his friend that "There are two curious subjects—the Christian and the Mohammedan worlds. The rest can be considered barbarian." Eversole maintains that the relationship between the Christian and the Islamic world was a novel and hot

subject among the humanists of the late Renaissance at the outset of Johnson's entrance to Oxford in 1728. Some of the frontiers and the Orientalist avant-gardes had already turned into legendary figures—Edward Pococke at Oxford and Simon Ockley at Cambridge being two such examples. Oxford, as an educated community, was coordinated with the Arabic, Persian and Hebrew comparative studies carried on by Pococke in the previous century. Johnson reflects this dominant atmosphere and tendency in his works at the beginning of his writing career. It was at Oxford that Johnson became acquainted with Lobo and decided to translate it. In an essay, Professor Gold comments on Johnson's model of Le Grand's translation which has been precisely inspired by Moslem writers' style (Gold 51-61). Moreover, Johnson later states that had he received his pension a little sooner, he would have gone to Constantinople to learn Arabic (Boswell *Life* 27-28). Furthermore, there is sufficient evidence that the dialogues of *Rasselas* are very similar to those of Hayyebne Yaghzan, the work of Ibne Tofeil. The English translation of this story, although now forgotten, has been available to Johnson. Eversole emphasizes the point that Johnson must at least have read the writers who have recommended the translation of *Persian Poetry* in the travels of Chardin. Eversole is quite positive that Johnson, like his translation of Lobo, has rendered an abstract of the historical-critical model of Persian and Arabic poetry. Such comments are all reflected in the first sentences of the tenth chapter of *Rasselas* already quoted. In the conclusion of the essay, Eversole deals with the comments of Chardin about the influence of Hafiz and Saadi on Western writers and specifically interprets some of the statements of *Rasselas* which he finds very similar to those of Saadi! Thus Johnson's familiarity with Persian literature is neither far-fetched nor impossible, but rather quite probable.

Besides the fore-going argument about the direct or indirect influence of Saadi on Johnson, there is much evidence in the world of literary history of similar instances of indirect influences which have grown pale or been

distorted through the course of time. One of such cases which is directly related to the present discussion on Saadi is narrated by Zia Movahhed in his readable work *Saadi* – the case which may be an appropriate ending for the present issue. He elaborates on the event that Gentinus, the same Dutch Orientalist, in the introduction of his book *The Hebrew History* quotes a moral story by a writer named Sadus without any reference to his nationality. Later, a British priest named Jeromy Taylor translates the same story and quotes it in his own book. One century later, Benjamin Franklin presents the same story as one of the chapters of Genesis (the first book of the Old Testament) which was lost. Thirty years later in 1789, Boucher declares that Franklin's story is exactly the story by the Persian poet Saadi. Eventually, this event grows quite controversial and Franklin is accused of plagiarism. Finally Lord Teignmouth, the governor of India at the time, winds up the whole controversy by identifying Saadi as the original writer of the quoted story who has been by mistake introduced as "Sadus" (Movahhed 82-3). This example is suggestive of the assumption that in the translation of Saadi's fables into different languages and their frequent quotations in the works of many Orientalists, such similar cases may very likely occur. In other words, this possibility always exists for a reader to be directly or indirectly influenced by the translation of Eastern writers and to imitate them in his works without being the direct reader of their works in the original language; the same way that Imlac's voice in *Rasselas* is the resonance of Saadi's voice in *Golestan*. Saadi's and Johnson's works beat the very same rhythm and song; their minds speak the same language if not their tongues.

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