

# Rumi and Sadi's Contribution to the Promotion of the Humanistic Culture

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## Abstract

With its sweetness and bitterness, with its fantasy and reality, literature is the soul of human culture. It graces civilizations with beauty, morality, and the love of humanity. It seeks to prompt human culture to march towards excellence and elegance and maintain distance from vileness and wickedness. With its stress on diversity, it strives to curb violence and arrogance. Its ideal lies in bestowing love, peace, and integrity upon the chaotic and materialistic existence to deliver it from meaninglessness and vulgarity. Thus, this article invokes Mathew Arnold's idea of culture to bring into light the contribution of two classical Persian poets: Rumi and Sadi, to the promotion of the humanistic culture. To this end, firstly, this article will briefly discuss the enemies and defenders of literature. Then it will dwell on the notion of culture from the perspective of Mathew Arnold. Secondly, it will highlight how Rumi preaches his faith in the humanistic culture by advocating tolerance and critiquing zealotry and fundamentalism in religion. Finally, it will illuminate how Sadi brings into fore his conviction about the humanistic culture by taking sides with the disfranchised maiden as well as by satirizing the older man desiring to marry her by the power of his wealth and the gift of gab.

**Keywords:** Humanistic Culture, Literature, Religion, Tolerance, Respect for Women

## Introduction

### 1.1. Enemies and Defenders of Literature

With its sweetness, literature refines vulgarity, inspires lofty ideas, and animates weary selves. With its alchemical power, it radiates extinguished souls, heals injured hearts, transforms sadness into delight, and makes existence bearable amidst frustration and abjection. As a magical verbal medium, literature has been the source of immense fear and tremor for those seeking to abuse and enrage human freedom and aspirations. Hence, it does not come as a surprise to find that it has its staunch adversaries among the philosophical, religious, and political classes.

Plato is articulate in his critique of poetry. For him, literature/poetry as the copy of a copy exerts pernicious impacts on its readers because it, for instance, portrays Hades, the world of dead people, as an unpleasant and fearful locus. Consequently, the younger generation craves for the pleasure of life, dreads death, and cannot exhibit valor in the battlegrounds (Hall, 1964, p.4). So, he deems it a plausible idea to banish poets from his Republic so that he can save his subjects from being coward and unmanly.

For puritans, literature has been the cause of unease and fear. Once a religious figure, Francis Bacon notes, called literature the wine of demon distracting humanity from the righteous path. Hence, it is a powerful instrument to push them into the dungeon of immorality (2012, p.1663). In a similar vein, Miskawayh, a medieval Muslim scholar, in his *Refinement of Character* strongly argues against poetry that deals with romantic and intimate feelings; he believes that the type of poetry will corrupt the souls of young students:

He [the malleable young student] should be put on his guard against the study of frivolous poetry and what it contains about love and lovers, against the impression which its authors give that it is a form of elegance and refinement. For this kind of poetry has a strong corrupting influence on youth (2015, p.304).

Ironically, the view of the Prophet Muhammed is at variance with Miskawayh. The Prophet is charmed by two lines from Antarah ibn Shaddad al Abasi, a pre-Islamic Arab poet: "I spent my days and night bearing the toils and travails of life merely to secure a noble living." (qtd. in Al-Ghazali, 1996, p. 433). The power of these lines makes him "wish to have met him" (Ibid.).

Literature is the powerful expression of free will, humanism, and individualism. As a result, it is interpreted as a threat to collectivism enshrined and advertised by totalitarian regimes (Hall, 1964, p.1). For instance, it explains why the guardians of Oceania in George Orwell's dystopian novel: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ban its subjects from reading literature. Their ultraconservative think tanks believe that literature can discourage its members from being loyal to Big Brother and his Party (1992, p.280) and will induce in them an impulse to pursue their private inclinations inconsistent with the blueprints of their totalitarian world. In other words, literature for them means the powerful instrument for their destruction. To give another example, in Margaret Atwood's dystopian work: *The Handmaid's Tale* reading literature is forbidden for its residents in Gilead, a theocratic regime (2006, p.148). For the masterminds of this regime, literature is equal to critical thinking. Therefore, they severely punish those who secretly read literary works since they view it as a shattering blow to the existence of their world.

If puritans, oppressive regimes, and some philosophers dismiss literature as the inferior copy and the vehicle of spreading impiety and lies in the society, some scholars and poets have defended it against these allegations. Sir Philip Sidney assumes that poetry moves its audience to do virtuous deeds; he also rejects the idea of poets as liars because they, he argues, do not confirm anythings (Abjadian, 2005, p.165). He, moreover, claims that poetry/literature is the act of creation, not

sterile imitation because it turns the brazen world into the golden one (Lawrence et al., 1985, p.143). Sidney argues that poetry acts better in imparting its lessons than history and philosophy since the former is too specific in its scope while the latter too general (p.140) Likewise, Francis Bacon, in the seventeenth century repudiates the belief that literature is socially subversive and dangerous. Rather than, he maintains that it possesses a divine element elevating and erecting minds (Klages, 2006, p.20). For Bacon, poetry/literature is superior to rationality thanks to its ability to create its world and maintain its rule over it (ibid.). Finally, Shelley, in the Romantic period, praises literature for mingling wisdom and delighting pleasingly, extending the sympathetic imagination, breeding virtues, curbing egocentrism, counterbalancing calculation and accumulation, and finally for preserving the fleeting visitations of the divinity in the veil of language (Leitch, 2010, p.593).

### **1.2. Mathew Arnold's View on Culture**

Mathew Arnold is a prominent British poet and critic in the second half of the Victorian era. Culture is one of his concerns in the secular age. He defines it as "the best has been thought and said in the world" (qtd. in Bertens, p.5). This definition rests on literature because one extracts lofty ideas and grand thoughts from turning and reading the pages of literary books. Indeed, Arnold implies that culture draws its nourishment from literature. Through the therapeutic and spiritual power of culture, he hopes to heal the ills of his society; otherwise, the community, he believes, will head into anarchy and mayhem. For him, paying excessive attention to amassing mammon as well as to machinery and industry has blunted souls and stifled the blossoming of culture. He accuses Philistines, the materialistic bourgeois class for these social maladies. He thinks that through harmonizing, civilizing, and humanizing the power of literature, it is possible to revive the culture (Moran, 2006, p.106). According to him, poets have shouldered this responsibility through acting like bees that scatter light and sweetness, not like selfish spiders that only entrap easy prey In other words, he observes, the poets should enlighten their audience to the virtues and charms of peace, humanity, and sympathy with the sweetness. For Arnold, literature is the fountain of wisdom; consequently, human beings rely on them for finding consolation, interpretation of life, and sustenance for their beleaguered lives (Bertens, p.5). He distinguishes two types of literature: Hellenistic and Hebraic. He champions the former due to its beauty, truth, sweetness, light, sensitivity, mighty imagination, spontaneity, humanity, clarity, grace, and ease arising from the Greek civilization. But Arnold does not approve of the latter since it obtains its energy from fire and strength; he associated it with the moral conscience, severity, and intolerant and inflexible puritans (Arnold, [1868] 2012, pp.1423-1425). In sum, Arnold maintains culture hinges on literature, especially Hellenistic one. This literature aims at fashioning a spiritual and humanistic culture that brims with virtues and sweetness far away from greed, artificiality, and selfishness. No doubt, Rumi and Sadi, like the creators of Hellenistic culture dreamed of a society with a bright and humanistic culture.

## 2. Rumi: The Road to the Humanistic Culture Passes Through Tolerance and Diversity

Last night a Sheikh patrolled the city while holding a torch in his hand  
(He said) I am weary of monsters and savages, I am desirous of *Human*  
(They) said they sought and could not find  
(He) said that what could not be found was his desire

### Rumi

Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi (1207-1273) was born in Balkh in today's Afghanistan. When he was a child, his family was forced to leave there due to the advancement of the notorious troops of Jenghiz Khan. They made a journey first to Baghdad. Via Syria, they moved to Konya, a city in Turkey, where they settled and put down roots. Art-loving Turkmen Seljuk rulers and the respectful Turk residents of Konya warmly received them and eased their worries about accommodation and financial matters. His life dramatically altered when he encountered Shams Tabrizi, a wandering Sufi. Shams kindled the fire of spiritual longing in the hitherto orthodox priest of Islam. Accordingly, he abandoned his former peaceful and secure existence and pursued the path of Sufism and illumination of the heart. Elif Shafak immortalized this life-changing encounter in her novel: *Forty Rules of Love*. His deep absorption in divine love resulted in his masterpiece: *Masnavi Manavi*, *The Spiritual Couplets*, composed spontaneously and orally, but his students immediately recorded his poems during his literary inspiration. Scholars unanimously eulogized his masterpiece as Koran in Persian and a paradise of hearts that purge inner sorrows. Rumi's *Masnavi Manavi* consists of six books, and each of them is the ever-flowing fountain of wisdom since Rumi extensively extracted these gems of wisdom from "theology, law, hadith, koranic exegesis, philosophy, and medicine" (McAuliffe, 2015, p.438). Readers from diverse backgrounds can rejoice over reading both ribald and pious anecdotes and allegories; however, it demands scholarly intelligence and diligence to penetrate its esoteric meanings.

In his *Masnavi Manavi*, Rumi dreams of a humanistic culture characterized by peace, respect, beauty openness, tolerance, egalitarianism, as well as sincerity of heart and love. He bitterly opposes a culture that erects and reinforces hierarchy and rigid borders and fuels discord and distrust. Also, he strongly critiques the violent, narrow-minded, and prejudiced interpretation of Islam. Indeed, Rumi is the archenemy of fundamentalism and violence in Islam. For him, Islam should reflect the radiance, beauty, and infinite grace of God, not darkness, ignorance, self-centeredness. He illustrates his intense desire for the cultivation of humanistic culture in the encounter between Moses and a plain shepherd in the book two of *Masnavi*:

En route, Moses chances upon a plain shepherd absorbed in outpouring his heart in the wilderness: "Oh, Lord! Where are you? I long to be your most royal servant to mend your rustic shoes, massage your feet, kiss your hands, comb your hair, do your laundries, remove your lice, bring milk for you, and bestow my goats for you. Oh, Lord, whom I call with my shouts, harken to my yearnings. His simple supplication infuriates Moses and wants him to put cotton into his mouth and stop uttering his blasphemy. If not, his foul discourse will fill the world. His censure makes him rend his shirt and flees with a heavy heart. Moses' ill-treatment of him raises God's ire; He reminds Moses that his mission is union, not alienation. He adds that if his words were poison for you, they are nectar for him. God states that for Him, the genuine longing of the heart is far more important than words. Filled with remorse, Moses looks for the shepherd to apologize. When he finds him, he shares God's glad tidings with him: his blasphemy is the true religion, and his words are the light of the soul, so he is not required to observe any ritual, and he is permitted to pray in his way (2010, pp.265-268)

In the above anecdote, Moses stands for Hebraic vision which is defined by fire, fury, and strict morality indicated by his baseless accusation and the excommunication of the shepherd. He cultivates the cult of exclusion and creates a rigid borderline between himself (the embodiment of official and closed religion) and the unpretentious shepherd (the symbol of spontaneity and sincerity of heart). Here, Moses forgets that his calling is linking human beings to God, not estranging them from him. But he acts like scissors when he is expected to function as a needle. His failure to respect the simple shepherd gives rise to discord and religious hierarchy. Due to this hierarchical vision, Moses does not brook the possibility of new paths to reach God. He believes that only his approach ends in true spiritual bliss and contentment, whereas other ways are futile and lead to darkness. Indeed, For Rumi, Moses' intolerance stems from his excessive attention to the form and his neglect of the shepherd's spiritual yearnings and humility, which are two vital elements in Sufism to please God. Indeed, Moses initially intends to hog all spiritual power and prestige for himself and deprives others of it. However, in Rumi's outlook, this egocentrism is doomed to failure. For him, spiritual maturity and growth take place after humility which paves the path for the emergence of humanistic culture.

When God admonishes Moses for his radical mentality and arrogant approach, he learns the lesson of respect for humanity and the value of diversity. Indeed, God wants him to adopt cultural relativism and open himself to divergent beliefs and opinions. Here Rumi beautifully conveys his faith in humanism: only through embracing the difference and alterity, one can advance culture and facilitate its blossoming; otherwise, the culture will rot from within. Then anarchy, indecency against humanity will rule the society and turns it into a dystopia and hellish place. For Rumi, the integrity, vitality, and salvation of culture hinge on a genuine understanding of humanity. He demonstrates his faith in humanism by extending

his sympathy with and imagination towards the despised and marginalized shepherd, and this is why he antagonizes and humiliates privileged and powerful Moses. Indeed Rumi breaks down the hierarchical and top-down thinking, but he adopts a horizontal and bottom-up vision that is ethical and in line with the ideals of democracy and equality.

### 3. Sadi: Humanistic Culture Hinges on Respecting Women

An adventurous traveler, enthusiastic learner of Islamic sciences, a sharp observer of humans' failings, social reformer, and freethinking poet, Sadi Shirazi (1245-1290) was born in Shiraz, Iran. He was a contemporary of Rumi and his admirer as well. The anxiety of invasion by Mongols convinced him to seek his scholarly fortune elsewhere. Hence, he traveled to Iraq where he devoted himself to learning Islamic sciences in the well-known madrasa of Baghdad. After graduation, he widely traveled and visited Turkey, China, India, Turkistan, Syria, and Mecca. Even for a short time, he fought against Crusaders in Palestine and became their prisoner as well. His journeys, rubbing his shoulder with different people, the observations of their manners and customs, as well as his command of the literary tradition and Islamic lore, resulted in his two masterpieces: *Gulistan, The Rose Garden*, and *Bustan, The Herb Garden*. The former is in prose but peppered with poetry while the latter is in poetry. His books earned him acclaim from two American scholars: Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson compares him with Homer, Cervantes, Montaigne, William Shakespeare, and distinguishes him from other 'Oriental' poets due to the variety of his themes and styles (1913, p.286). He also praised him for his love of humanity and his desire to instruct his readers. He dexterously summarizes the essence of his works, "Sadi praises alms, hospitality, justice, courage, bounty, and humility; he respects the poor and the kings who befriend the poor. He admires the royal eminence of dervish" (p. 287). Similarly, Thoreau acknowledged his wisdom and greatness in his *Walden* and identified himself with this nightingale of Persian literature (Scott, 2007, p.23).

Sadi's outlook towards the universe resembles that of English poets in the Age of Reason. He is the poet of the society, and his poetical world revolves around real humans with their real shortcomings. As an optimist poet, he believes that humans' failings are amendable. As a result, he envisions a world as beautiful as the rose garden adorned by virtues such as humanity, beauty, honesty, and peace. Undoubtedly, in his ideal culture, the role of humankind is outstanding. These lines from his "Oneness of Mankind" attest to his conviction:

All men are members of the same body,  
 Created from one essence  
 If fate brings suffering to one member,  
 The others cannot stay at rest  
 You who remain indifferent to the burden of pain of others  
 Do not deserve to be called human (2012, p.29).

In an age in which misogyny is rampant, he is the indefatigable defender of women's rights. He holds that without women's support, it is hard to picture men's success and advancement. Unlike his peers, he rejects the notion that women's beauty is their only invaluable asset. Instead, he celebrates their merits and chastity rather than appearance (Yousefi, p.36). In place of fortifying a negative attitude about women, he lauds, for instance, the valor of a young Arab girl who confronts the invading army and dissuades its commanders from killing and looting her tribesmen by her grace and eloquence (Hosseini, 2009, p.60). It is hard to imagine his belief in the humanistic culture without his sincere reverence for women. In other words, for him without showing respect for women, the culture is null and void. His reverence is nowhere more evident than in this anecdote from his *Gulistan*:

A wealthy older man narrates that he has wished to marry a graceful damsel. With her parents' consent, he calls her to his chamber, adorned with colorful flowers and perfumed with the fragrance of roses. In her companionship, he endeavors to win her heart by his humorous tales. He tells her that she has been so fortunate to enjoy the friendship of an older man who is cosmopolitan, experienced, and affectionate. He adds that she is lucky that he has not fallen into the hands of a young man who is by nature impulsive, fickle, reckless, and lustful and lives in accordance with his whims and passions. But in his old age, he is poised and reliable. He thinks that her silence during his boring lecture is a sign of her agreement and confirmation. Hence, the older man imagines that he has achieved his goal. Contrary to his expectation, the maiden breaks her silence and tells him that your words do not have any weight in the scale of my mind, and pours cold water over him with her witty repartee: "An arrow penetrating to her side is far better than an older man at her side." Therefore, he banishes the idea of marriage and does not pursue her. To the older man's surprise, she marries a poor and ill-tempered young man, but she still feels pleased. Accordingly, out of her satisfaction, she recites this poem:

Oh, my young husband, my sweet man,  
I do bear your fiery temper and all hardship.  
With thee, torment and burning,  
Better than the Eden with an older man.  
The foul odor of onion from thy mouth,  
[Is] sweeter than a rose from an old, ugly hand (Sadi, *Gulistan*, pp.90-91)

In an era in which the patriarchal worldview is doubtful about women's moral integrity and intelligence, and ceaselessly promulgates the inferiority of them while their own ascendancy, Sadi in the above anecdote defies this system and exposes its fault line. He scatters the sweetness of humanity by enlightening his readership about the incivility and inhumanity of the older man (the infallible symbol of this man-centered vision). As a consequence, he champions the cause of the young damsel and presents her with a powerful and heroic persona. She does not

surrender herself to his gift gab, wealth, and power trappings. With a dogged determination, she exercises her willpower and bravely declines his shameful marriage proposal. She reminds him that she is ready to give up her life, but she will not permit him to exploit her body and make her defeat his trophy. She prefers the instability, poverty, and hardship of marrying a young man of her choice to the comfort, stability, and fortune of the older man. In an age in which, women's reticence is highly valued; she speaks out against gender injustice and does not adopt a passive stance. Freedom and individualism are her two ultimate goals. For her, loveless arranged marriage amounts to death and servitude. Also, it means falling into the trap of patriarchal tyranny. So, she battles against it and wins. Through her activism, Sadi acknowledges the better days for women and envisions an egalitarian world.

As a satirist, Sadi gently ridicules the older man and illustrates the vanity of his desire. The poet is successful in making his unethical proposal repulsive and abhorrent. In this short tale, Sadi implies the marriage between a frail older man and the young maiden is a social ill that should be healed with the medicine of humanity and freedom. Indeed, Sadi dreams of a world in which women are outspoken freedom fighters against the oppression and discrimination that the patriarchal system has been imposing on them. For him, culture without respecting the rights of women is sick and never leads to happiness.

## Conclusion

Poets are the alert conscience of their societies; they are idealists that cannot brook the social evils and violation of human dignity. These fountains of wisdom dream of a world in which virtues reign supreme. They are knights of egalitarian culture embarked upon their fight the cult of exclusion and patriarchal system. In the medieval period, Sadi and Rumi, two torches of Persian literature, with the sweetness of words and light of their humanity have contributed to the promotion of humanistic culture. Interestingly, Rumi desires an open and all-embracing religion. Borders, intolerance, prejudice, arrogance, formality, inflexibility, and lack of attention to the sincerity of heart in the religion irritate him. For him, if there is love, peace, understanding, humility, openness, and horizontal power relations within the ambit of the religion, the humanistic culture will blossom. Otherwise, the bitterness of discord will wreak havoc on it. Likewise, Sadi cannot imagine the growth of humanistic culture without observing the rights of women by men. He abhors and satirizes the marriage between older men and young damsels. For him, the solution for this thorny problem lies in courageous women who question and defy the legitimacy of the patriarchal system and fight for their freedom and rights.



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## إسهامات الرومي والسعدي الشيرازي في تطوير الثقافة الانسانية

احمد قلي

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### الملخص

يعتبر الأدب بحلاوته ومرارته و بطابعه الخيالي و الواقعي، روح الثقافة الانسانية. لأنه يَهَبُ الجمال و الأخلاقيات و حبّ البشرية للحضارات الانسانية. كان الأدب يسعى دوما لتطوير الثقافة الانسانية و توجيهها نحو الكمال و الرقيّ و إبعادها عن الدناءة و الشرّ. بالتأكيد على التعددية، يحاول الأدب الحدّ من العنف و الغطرسة و يتطلّع إلى أهداف سامية كمنح الحبّ و السلام و الأمن للحياة المادية و الفوضوية البشرية حتى أن ينقذها من العبثية و الابتذال. بالاستناد على آراء ماثيو آرنولد حول الثقافة، تحاول هذه المقالة أن يدرس إسهامات الشعراء الايرانيين الكلاسيكين و هما الرومي و السعدي، في تطوير الثقافة الانسانية. و تحقيقا لهذا الغرض، تُدرس في بداية المقالة آراء معارضي و مدافعي الأدب ثم يأتي الحديث على مفهوم الثقافة من منظار ماثيو آرنولد. بعد ذلك، يتمّ التركيز على أسلوب الرومي في التعبير عن إعتقاده بالثقافة الانسانية بمناصرة ثقافة التسامح و إدانة العصبية و التطرّف في الدين. بالنهاية، توضّح المقالة آراء سعدي في الدفاع عن حقوق الفتيات قبل الزواج و السخرية من الرجال المسنين الأثرياء الذين يحاولون الزواج بهنّ.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الحضارة الانسانية، الأدب، الدين، التسامح، إحترام المرأة