10(1), 2026, pp. 1-21

https://doi.org/10.22099/jps.2026.47840.1126

https://plsj.shirazu.ac.ir/

Frequency: Quarterly
Print ISSN: 2322-2557
Online ISSN: 2717-2848

Research Article

A Survey of the Evolution of Earthly Love in Persian Literature: Sa'di's Ghazals in Context

Manizheh Abdollahi *

Professor, Department of Persian Language and Literature, School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (SUMS), Shiraz, Iran.

* manijeh.abdolahi@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Submission History

Received: 2026-02-15
Accepted: 2026-03-18

Keywords

Sa'di
Persian ghazal
earthly love
beloved
Persian lyric poetry
love poetry

How to cite this article

Abdolahi, M. (2026). A Survey of the Evolution of Earthly Love in Persian Literature: Sa'di's Ghazals in Context. Persian Literary Studies Journal, 10(1), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.22099/jps.2026.47840.1126

ABSTRACT

This article examines the transformation of earthly love in Persian lyric poetry from the early post-Islamic period to the ghazals of Sa'di. Through close readings of selected poems by early Persian poets and by Farrokhi Sistani, Anvari, Zahir Faryabi, Khaqani, and Sa'di, it traces changes in the representation of the beloved, the relative agency of lover and beloved, the social hierarchy implicit in the poetic relationship, and the degree to which love is imagined as enduring and ethically transformative. In the earlier examples examined here, love is often associated with physical beauty, erotic desire, social asymmetry, and impermanence. In twelfth-century lyric poetry, the beloved acquires greater emotional authority, while the lover increasingly accepts suffering and distance. In Sa'di's ghazals, earthly love is further idealized as a response to beauty and perfection, a lasting commitment, an experience of unity, and a force capable of weakening egocentrism and reshaping the lover's ethical self. The article argues that Sa'di elevates human love without simply dissolving it into mystical love, thereby preserving its embodied and interpersonal character while giving it broader spiritual and ethical significance.

COPYRIGHTS ©2026 The author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, as long as the original authors and source are cited. No permission is required from the authors or the publisher.

Introduction

Love is one of the most persistent themes of Persian literature, appearing across epic, qasida, ghazal[1], ruba'i, and narrative romance. Within Persian lyric poetry, love may be represented as mystical, earthly or human, or as a deliberately unstable combination of the two, as is often the case in Hafez. The present article focuses on earthly love and asks how its literary representation changes from the early centuries of New Persian poetry to the thirteenth-century ghazals of Sa'di.

This thematic breadth is also reflected in the variety of poetic forms through which love is articulated. Early New Persian verse often embeds amatory description within the qasida, while the ghazal gradually becomes the privileged form for sustained representations of longing, separation, union, jealousy, and devotion. Narrative romances, ruba'i, and epic passages preserve other configurations of desire, but the ghazal is especially important for the present discussion because it makes the shifting relation between lover and beloved unusually visible. The historical movement traced here is therefore not a linear replacement of one concept of love by another; rather, it is a change in emphasis, vocabulary, hierarchy, and emotional expectation within a continuing poetic tradition.

For the purposes of this article, "earthly love" refers to love directed toward a human beloved and represented through bodily presence, interpersonal attachment, emotional dependence, and the desire for union. Such love may acquire ethical or spiritual dimensions without thereby ceasing to be earthly. This distinction is particularly important in reading Sa'di, whose ghazals often allow a recognizably human beloved to carry meanings that exceed immediate sensual gratification.

The distinction between earthly and mystical love should not be treated as absolute. Premodern Persian poetry frequently allows erotic, ethical, social, and spiritual meanings to overlap. Brookshaw accordingly emphasizes the wide spectrum of premodern Persian desire, ranging from selfless devotion and yearning for union to explicitly sensual desire and relationships structured by social inequality (Brookshaw, 2009: 673). Rather than imposing a rigid opposition between the sensual and the spiritual, this article traces a shift in emphasis: from relatively concrete representations of bodily attraction and asymmetrical relations toward increasingly idealized forms of devotion in which the beloved becomes a source of ethical and spiritual transformation.

Because the concept of love is inseparable from the poetic construction of the beloved, the analysis considers both sides of the relationship. It pays particular attention to the language used to describe beauty, the lover's expectations, the beloved's degree of agency, the permanence or impermanence of desire, and the ethical effects attributed to love. The corpus is selective rather than exhaustive, and the periodization is heuristic. Poetic speakers and beloveds are treated as literary constructions rather than as transparent records of actual social behavior. With these qualifications, the examples nevertheless reveal a meaningful development in the literary imagination of love before and in Sa'di.

[1]The ghazal is a self-contained lyric form with its own metrical and rhyming conventions. Although it can be compared with compact Western lyric forms, it should not be treated as formally equivalent to the sonnet. In Persian literary history, the ghazal became a major vehicle for themes of love, longing, separation, and union.

For analytical purposes, pre-Sa'di love poetry is discussed in two broad phases: first, early Persian lyric poetry from approximately the third to the fifth centuries AH (ninth to eleventh centuries CE); and second, the sixth century AH (twelfth century CE), the period immediately preceding Sa'di.[2]

Love before Sa'di

Love in Early Persian Lyric Poetry (3rd-5th Centuries AH/9th-11th Centuries CE)

A prominent feature of many early examples examined here is the emphasis on bodily attraction and the desire for union. The beloved's face, hair, eyes, lips, and figure are described in concrete and highly visual terms. At the same time, Persian love poetry also includes male beloveds, and the grammatical gender of several common Persian words for the beloved is not always explicit.[3] An early poem attributed to Abu Shu'ayb Salih ibn Mohammad Heravi, for example, describes a Christian beloved primarily through visible physical features:

A non-Muslim with a heavenly face and appearance,
Deer-eyed, curly-haired, with tulip-colored cheeks;
Lips as though painted by a Chinese master...
A slender nose, delicate as silk,
Like a fine thread tied in a knot;
Below it, the mouth is a treasure,
Above it, the eyes are like heaven,
A silver line drawn across the face.
(Oufi, 1382: 14)

Such descriptions emphasize the visible body and the immediacy of desire. In some early courtly poems, the relationship is also marked by a clear social hierarchy. The beloved's principal power is beauty, yet that beauty is represented as temporary, and the lover may respond to resistance or estrangement from a position of superiority. Farrokhi Sistani, for instance, connects the durability of love to the durability of beauty:
The descriptive focus is nevertheless selective. The poet repeatedly names individual features - the eyes, lips, hair, face, waist, and stature - and assembles them into an attractive whole, but the body is normally mediated through conventional images rather than exposed in explicit anatomical detail. Beauty is thus concrete without being simply realistic: the visible beloved is stylized through comparison with flowers, precious substances, celestial bodies, and luxury objects. The effect is to keep desire close to the sensory world while already subjecting the body to the formalizing pressure of poetic convention.

Do not rely on the beauty of your face, for it will fade;
Even Saturn at the height of beauty does not remain so forever.
(Farrokhi Sistani, 1380: 203)

In the same rhetorical world, reconciliation may also be presented as conditional and controlled by the lover. The beloved is imagined as the party who must apologize and accept the terms of renewed attachment:

[2] The dominant courtly form in the earlier period was the qasida, often composed in praise of rulers and patrons. Its opening nasib could contain amatory material closely related to the later independent ghazal; this article therefore considers such lyric passages when discussing the prehistory of the ghazal.

[3] The gender of the beloved in Persian lyric poetry can be grammatically ambiguous. Terms such as ma'shuq, mahbub, dust, and yar may refer to either a male or a female beloved in Persian usage. The presence of male beloveds is therefore a significant feature of the tradition, but a full discussion lies beyond the scope of this article.

I reconciled after a long quarrel,
On the condition that she no longer behave coquettishly;
She regretted what she had done and apologized for it all,
And I accepted her apology and loved her once again.
(Farrokhi Sistani, 1380: 203)

The point is not that every historical relationship followed this pattern. Rather, the verse reveals a poetic hierarchy in which the lover may imagine himself as possessing the authority to withdraw, impose conditions, and restore the relationship. This is precisely the kind of asymmetry that becomes less stable in later ghazal poetry.

The asymmetry is even more explicit in poems where the beloved is represented as a servant or enslaved person. Such verses should not be taken as direct evidence of every historical love relationship; rather, they show that the poetic language of desire could draw upon contemporary structures of status and dependency. Farrokhi writes:

You are my slave, and the king is my master;
You do me no favor, while my master favors me.
(Farrokhi Sistani, 1380: 321)

Within such a hierarchy, the beloved's consent is not foregrounded in the way it would be in a modern account of reciprocal love. The poetic speaker assumes social and rhetorical precedence, and the beloved's dependence is part of the scene through which desire is articulated. This feature must be read historically and critically: it belongs to the literary representation of status in a courtly society and should not be generalized into an account of Persian love poetry as a whole. Its importance for the present argument lies in the contrast it creates with later poems, where the lover increasingly submits to the beloved's judgment, distance, or refusal.

Within this poetic model, the lover often appears as the initiating and socially dominant figure, while the beloved is granted comparatively little agency. The instability of desire is also openly acknowledged: the arrival of a new beloved may displace an earlier attachment.

The old love had scarcely settled in my heart
When a new love came to me.
(Farrokhi Sistani, 1380: 117)

The youthfulness of the beloved is another recurrent feature of early lyric description. At times the lover even adopts a protective or quasi-parental idiom, addressing the beloved with expressions that combine affection, possession, and concern:

I send someone to tell you: do not go that way;
With such a beautiful face, dear one, the evil eye may fall upon you.

The language is affectionate, but it also reinforces the unequal structure of the relationship: the lover speaks as one who advises, protects, and evaluates, while the beloved remains primarily the object of attention. Read together with the verses on changing attachments, this pattern suggests that love has not yet become an autonomous ethical value that obliges the lover irrespective of beauty, access, or possession.

The dominant tendency in these examples is therefore not simply 'sexuality' in an abstract sense, but a combination of physical attraction, social hierarchy, and acknowledged impermanence. The lover may suffer from

separation or infidelity, yet love is not necessarily imagined as an eternal value independent of the beloved's body and presence. Farrokhi states succinctly:

Love, even when it lasts long, eventually comes to an end.
(Farrokhi Sistani, 1380: 39)

The dominant erotic logic of these examples may therefore be described as non-reproductive eros: desire is directed toward pleasure, presence, and the satisfaction of attraction rather than toward marriage, lineage, or domestic continuity. This should not be reduced to a claim that early Persian love poetry is merely sexual. Even here the lover can suffer from separation, jealousy, and the beloved's unfaithfulness. What distinguishes the early model is that these emotions do not yet consistently produce the ideal of unconditional, everlasting devotion that becomes central to Sa'di's ghazals. Love remains vulnerable to changes in beauty, access, social circumstance, and the arrival of another beloved.

The Twelfth-Century Transition

During the sixth century AH (twelfth century CE), Persian poetry underwent important formal and thematic changes. Courtly qasida remained significant, but the ghazal developed into an increasingly autonomous vehicle for lyric and emotional expression. The growth of Sufi discourse and the expanding prestige of inward, spiritualized models of love also affected the vocabulary of secular lyric poetry. These changes should not be reduced to a single political or intellectual cause, but together they created conditions in which the beloved could be represented with greater independence and the lover's suffering could acquire new value.

Many poets of this transitional period were still primarily qasida poets. Panegyric poetry remained materially important because it connected the poet to courtly patronage, yet lyric passages increasingly acquired an emotional and formal independence of their own. The change is therefore visible not only in subject matter but also in the prestige of genres: the ghazal, once closely related to the amatory opening of the qasida, increasingly becomes a self-sufficient field for the exploration of love.

Zahir Faryabi expresses this new valuation succinctly:

Among poetic forms, the ghazal is better,
Even though I have little power to compose it as it deserves.
(Zahir Faryabi, 1387: 19)

The statement is important because it comes from a poet deeply formed by the qasida tradition. It registers the rising authority of the ghazal at precisely the moment when the emotional relation between lover and beloved is becoming more complex and less easily contained within the older language of possession and rank.

The growing prestige of the ghazal was accompanied by changes in the representation of the love relationship. Shortly before Sa'di, poets such as Zahir Faryabi and Anvari (d. ca. 1189/90) produced love poems in which the relation between lover and beloved appears more emotionally reciprocal, or at least less securely controlled by the lover. Yet beauty still remains a central condition of desire. Anvari writes:

If your beauty endures,
My love will endure as well.
(Anvari, 1364: 519)

The verse implies that love remains connected to the continuation of beauty. The beloved's physical features continue to be praised, but description becomes more metaphorical and less narrowly documentary:

The moon is no brighter than you;
Sugar is no sweeter than your lips.
(Anvari, 1364: 513)

At the same time, the beloved increasingly appears as an autonomous figure who may ignore, reject, or verbally wound the lover. The lover's willingness to endure this treatment becomes an important sign of devotion:

Your words are bitter as poison,
Yet from them my delight becomes sweeter than sugar.
(Anvari, 1364: 513)

At times the beloved's autonomy is represented even more starkly through indifference. The lover's distress no longer compels a response:

You do not care that I am broken.

The very brevity of the complaint is revealing. The beloved is no longer merely a beautiful subordinate who may be warned about the passing of beauty; she can become the emotionally dominant figure whose refusal intensifies the lover's attachment. The lover's willingness to endure such indifference marks an important step toward the ethic of suffering and fidelity that Sa'di later develops much more fully.

This alteration in the balance of power is especially important. The beloved is no longer merely the object of a socially superior lover's desire; the beloved can become emotionally sovereign, while the lover accepts distance, cruelty, or indifference as part of love. Khaqani expresses this willingness to suffer in strikingly absolute terms:

If you wish to kill a lover, I am that lover;
If I must be killed, I would rather die for your sake.
(Khaqani Shervani, 1373: ghazal 179)

The relationship has therefore moved toward a more nearly equal - and at moments reversed - distribution of power. The lover may still seek physical union, and the beloved's visible beauty remains a major source of desire, but emotional authority increasingly belongs to the beloved. The lover's response is not withdrawal but endurance. Traces of sublimation become more evident: pain, distance, and verbal cruelty can themselves be incorporated into the experience of love and treated as evidence of sincerity.

The presence of male beloveds also continues in this period. Persian lyric diction often leaves gender unstated, and some poems explicitly address a male beloved. This continuity is important because it cautions against reducing the development described here to a simple history of heterosexual romance. The transformation concerns the poetic structure of devotion, agency, and idealization more broadly, even though the examples discussed in this article often use feminine pronouns for clarity.

Thus, before Sa'di, the Persian ghazal had already begun to move toward a more inward and affective conception of love. Physical attraction remained essential, but emotional submission, endurance, and the beloved's increased authority prepared the ground for the further idealization found in Sa'di.

Earthly Love in Sa'di's Ghazals

Sa'di occupies a central position in the history of the Persian ghazal. His lyric

language combines apparent simplicity with rhetorical precision, and his poems repeatedly move from concrete scenes of human attachment to general reflections on love, beauty, suffering, and ethical transformation. Earthly love in Sa'di is not devoid of bodily desire; rather, bodily beauty becomes the starting point for a more comprehensive conception of the beloved's value.

Sa'di's poetry is especially effective in representing the emotional intensity of union and separation without abandoning restraint. In one sequence, the presence of the beloved is imagined as a suspension of ordinary time:

Tonight, when I am in the arms of my sweet beloved,
I would not grieve even if I were burned like aloeswood.
O heaven, close the window of morning for a moment;
Do not let the sun rise while I am with my moon.
I do not know whether this is a holy night or the light of day-
Whether you stand before me, or I am seeing a vision.
(Sa'di, 1363: 553)

The immediacy of such scenes helps explain the celebrated quality often described in Persian criticism as sahl-e momtane': a style that appears easy and natural but proves extremely difficult to imitate. The speaker's private emotion is rendered in language sufficiently transparent to become shareable. Individual experience is not erased; instead, it is generalized into a recognizable structure of longing. This movement from the particular to the exemplary is crucial to Sa'di's treatment of earthly love.

This combination of intimacy and generality gives Sa'di's love poetry a distinctive position in the tradition. The speaker can sound as though he were describing a single, intensely personal encounter, yet the emotional configuration is open enough to be inhabited by different readers. The beloved is at once particular and exemplary. In this sense, Sa'di does not erase individuality in order to produce an abstract doctrine of love; rather, he allows the felt concreteness of an encounter to become the basis of a more universal language of attachment.

Later lyric poetry often inherits Sa'di's vocabulary of the beloved - the face, hair, mouth, cruelty, coyness, separation, and union - to such an extent that these features can become conventionalized. In Sa'di himself, however, the conventions frequently retain the force of immediate experience. The result is a poetics in which convention and personal affect reinforce one another rather than cancel each other out.

A verse in which the beloved is metaphorically elevated to the status of an object of worship illustrates this movement:

Whoever truly loves something gives the self to it;
Whoever has you as a god never abandons worship.
(Sa'di, 1363: 471)

The hyperbole does not necessarily turn the human beloved into a mystical abstraction. Rather, it allows a particular attachment to acquire a generalized language of devotion. Sa'di's ghazal repeatedly sustains this tension between the concrete beloved and an ideal of love that exceeds the immediate encounter.

Beauty and Ethical Value

In Sa'di's ghazals, beauty is not merely a list of physical attributes. The beloved's appearance is repeatedly linked to character,

grace, perfection, and the lover's transformation. This marks an important difference from the earlier examples discussed above. The beloved remains physically attractive, but the significance of beauty lies increasingly in its effect on the lover and in the values that it is taken to disclose.

Like wine in a clear glass,
Good character shines through the beauty of your face.
(Sa'di, 1363: 412)

Elsewhere the same movement from appearance to character is made explicit:

How beautiful is the one whose sight has taken away my patience;
The face itself revealed the beauty of the temperament.
(Sa'di, 1363: 598)

Beauty therefore functions as an active force. The sight of the beloved can become an omen of good fortune, and true beauty cannot remain concealed:

Good fortune enters through the door from which you enter;
The sight of your blessed face opens the door to happiness.
(Sa'di, 1363: 597)
With such beauty, you cannot hide yourself;
You are visible like the sun through glass, like an angel through a garment.
(Sa'di, 1363: 597)

Because the beloved's beauty is presented as intrinsically worthy, the lover's attachment is no longer purely possessive. Other lovers can recognize the same value, and the beloved becomes the center of a shared field of desire rather than a private possession:

I am not the only one caught in your love;
Everywhere there is some poor lover fallen for you.
(Sa'di, 1363: 786)

This may be described as a form of realistic idealization. Sa'di does not abandon the human beloved, but he presents beauty and virtue as sufficiently compelling to justify unconditional devotion. In this framework, possessing the beloved symbolically outweighs all other forms of possession:

If nothing remains to me in this world or the next,
If I have you, I have everything though I own nothing.
If I were given a choice between all that exists in the two worlds,
I would choose the beloved; let the whole of paradise be yours.
(Sa'di, 1363: 413)

The logic of these verses can be described as a movement from description to valuation. Earlier lyric poetry certainly idealizes beauty, but Sa'di repeatedly asks what beauty does to the lover and what kind of person is worthy of sustained love. Outward appearance becomes meaningful because it is read as the sign or vehicle of inner excellence. The distinction is never absolute - Sa'di remains fascinated by the visible beloved - yet the visible is increasingly interpreted through ethical categories such as goodness, grace, fidelity, and perfection.

This is why the term "realistic idealization" is useful here. The beloved does not disappear into a purely metaphysical principle; she remains a body, a face, a voice, and a presence. At the same time, those concrete features are made to bear an ideal weight. The lover's response to beauty therefore becomes a test of perception: to see the beloved properly is to

recognize a value that exceeds possession and immediate pleasure.

Love as a Principal Aim of Life

The idealization of the beloved leads Sa'di toward a second important development: love itself becomes a durable value rather than a temporary response to beauty. The poetic relationship is progressively detached from the immediate conditions of time and possession. This does not mean that earthly love becomes identical with mystical love; rather, human attachment is granted a permanence and seriousness that approach philosophical or spiritual commitment.

At its most intense, this development approaches abstraction. The relationship is imagined as capable of surviving the ordinary coordinates of time and place, and love itself comes to appear as a principle by which life is measured. Sa'di's language does not require the reader to decide whether every such statement is mystical or secular. Its power lies precisely in allowing earthly attachment to approach the horizon of absolute value without losing the human beloved from view.

Once love is treated in this way, the distance between saying that love gives meaning to a life and saying that love belongs to the structure of existence becomes very small. Persian mystical discourse had already provided a rich vocabulary for such claims, but Sa'di's ghazals repeatedly bring that vocabulary back into scenes of human longing. The result is not a denial of earthly love but its elevation: the lover's devotion to a particular beloved becomes the experiential ground from which broader statements about fidelity, existence, and value can be made.

Sa'di repeatedly presents life without love as incomplete. Time spent with the beloved is not wasted time; on the contrary, the unloved life is represented as the true loss:

They warn me not to waste my life with the beautiful beloved;
The one who has no beloved is the one who wastes life.
(Sa'di, 1363: 472)

Love also resists the ordinary logic of decline. Whereas earlier poems may connect the end of beauty with the end of love, Sa'di imagines attachment as deepening with time:

Everyone's desire diminishes as time passes,
Except mine: my first love grows deeper every day.
(Sa'di, 1363: 423)

Mystics have gone, and Sufis are still dancing;
Love has a beginning, but it has no end.
(Sa'di, 1363: 788)

The lover's fidelity extends even to death, and sometimes rhetorically beyond it:

With my final breath I still long to see you;
I die hoping to become the dust of your dwelling.
(Sa'di, 1363: 560)

Even a thousand years after my death,
The scent of your hair would bring me back to life.
(Sa'di, 1363: 560)

These hyperboles are central to Sa'di's poetics. They convert the contingency of an earthly relationship into an ideal of unwavering fidelity and thereby make love itself, rather than possession or gratification, the principal value.

The Unity of Lover and Beloved

A third feature of Sa'di's earthly love is the desire to overcome distance between lover and beloved. Love gives the lover's existence meaning by placing the self in relation to another person. The resulting unity is not presented as the disappearance of individuality so much as an intensified reciprocity in which the beloved's beauty and the lover's capacity to perceive it reflect one another.

You appear exceedingly beautiful in my faithful mirror;
My mirror is clear, and you are beautiful.
(Sa'di, 1363: 412)

The mirror image suggests that beauty is relational: the beloved's radiance and the lover's truthful perception reinforce each other. This logic also explains why concealment becomes difficult. The closer the relationship approaches unity, the less successfully the lover can hide its effects:

I struggled desperately to keep love secret;
But once I was on fire, I could no longer conceal the flame.
(Sa'di, 1363: 560)

Separation, by contrast, becomes a form of deprivation:

News of you only intensifies the pain of separation,
Like the dream of cool water in the mind of the thirsty.
(Sa'di, 1363: 599)

Even union does not extinguish desire. Sa'di compares the lover to a person drinking from the Euphrates who becomes more thirsty the deeper he enters the water:

The thirsty one may be calmed by the Euphrates;
I enter it and become still more thirsty.
(Sa'di, 1363: 553)

The beloved therefore becomes the exclusive focus of attention. The lover envies whatever is physically close to the beloved and rejects alternative objects of desire:

I envy the garment that lies against you;
I am jealous even of the perfume upon your body.
(Sa'di, 1363: 511)
With these two eyes I look only at you tonight;
Tomorrow I wish to look at no one else.
(Sa'di, 1363: 553)

The same exclusiveness appears elsewhere in even more direct formulations:

I cannot be without you for a single moment;
I have no wish to see anyone except you.
(Sa'di, 1363: 568)

And again:

I cannot endure being far from you;
I cannot endure anyone in your place.
(Sa'di, 1363: 568)

These repetitions are not merely rhetorical excess. They show how union reorganizes the lover's field of attention: alternatives cease to matter, and the beloved becomes the measure against which all other possible attachments are judged. The lover's world contracts around one person even as the language used to describe that attachment expands toward universality.

The intensity of union can even make the lover imagine the last physical barrier-clothing itself-as intolerable:

At the moment of union, if only our garments remain between us,

I will tear them away if they become a barrier.
(Sa'di, 1363: 553)

The intensity of union therefore has a double function. On one level it remains frankly erotic: the lover wishes to eliminate even the material barrier of clothing. On another level, the extremity of desire transforms the lover's relation to the self. Love-sickness, waiting, and the repeated experience of separation discipline the lover into a form of constancy. The more complete the devotion, the less central the lover's own comfort becomes.

This helps explain why disappointment does not necessarily dissolve the relationship. Sa'di's lover may be separated, ignored, or deprived of union, yet he continues to define himself through love. Persistence is itself a value. The lover is elevated not because suffering is intrinsically good, but because the willingness to remain faithful under adverse conditions demonstrates that love has become more important than immediate gratification.

Yet the significance of this intensity is not exhausted by erotic fulfillment. The lover's persistence through separation and disappointment is repeatedly presented as a discipline of self-surrender. Devotion to the beloved becomes a test of the lover's capacity to move beyond self-interest:

I honor the true devotees of love, those free spirits
Who, for the beloved's sake, forget themselves completely.
(Sa'di, 1363: 494)

Love as Freedom, Self-Transcendence, and Happiness

The ethical consequence of such devotion is a loosening of egocentrism. The lover's attachment to another person interrupts ordinary habits of self-protection, calculation, and social conformity. In Sa'di's ghazals, love frequently stands against excessive asceticism, reputation, and rigid respectability. It creates a freedom that is inward before it is social.

My whole family were people of theology;
Your love taught me to become a poet.
(Sa'di, 1363: 422)

Love can similarly overturn the lover's previous attachment to ascetic discipline:

The affliction of your love uprooted asceticism and piety,
Until the Sufi chose the qalandar's way.
(Sa'di, 1363: 422)

At moments, Sa'di generalizes this transformative force from the individual to the community:

The affliction of your love left no pious person in the town;
Even one as devout as I was no longer knew how to forget you and pray.
(Sa'di, 1363: 446)

The lover's freedom is also expressed through indifference to conventional rewards in this world or the next:

If I were given a choice in the two worlds,
I would choose love; let all the blessings of paradise be yours.
(Sa'di, 1363: 413)

This rhetoric has a close analogue in Hafez's later declaration, 'Love's slave, I am; and of both worlds, free am I' (Hafez, 1377: 304). In Sa'di, however, the movement toward freedom remains closely tied to the concrete beloved. Thinking continuously of the

beloved reduces the centrality of the self and encourages radical devotion:

You are my ultimate aim in this world, O dear;
A thousand dear lives would be sacrificed for you, O dear.
(Sa'di, 1363: 449)

At its most extreme, this devotion becomes humility. The lover not only refuses to claim superiority over the beloved but questions his own worthiness to love:

Who am I to desire you?
It is almost a pity that I should be your lover and you my beloved.
(Sa'di, 1363: 559)

Such self-abasement is not simply passivity. The lover also acquires the courage to disregard blame and to acknowledge personal imperfection openly:

This openness to blame also introduces an element of self-critique. The lover no longer protects a spotless public image at all costs; he can acknowledge fault because love has weakened the authority of reputation. In this sense, devotion has a critical function: it exposes the distance between social respectability and inward truth. What matters is not appearing faultless before others, but remaining truthful to the experience that has transformed the self.

The same reordering affects jealousy. Rivalry never disappears entirely from Persian love poetry, and Sa'di can certainly write jealous verses. Yet the poems emphasized here imagine a lover whose confidence in the beloved's value makes constant surveillance less necessary. Compared with the anxious possession found in some earlier examples, this is a notable ethical shift. The beloved's sublimity is not diminished by being seen by others, and the lover's attachment need not depend upon controlling access to the beloved.

No one among the people is without fault;
They conceal their faults, while we have made ours public.
(Sa'di, 1363: 799)

The idealized lover consequently becomes less preoccupied with rivalry and jealousy. Earlier poetry often dramatizes anxiety over the rival or the beloved's disloyalty; Sa'di can instead imagine the beloved as too elevated to be diminished by the gaze of others:

Unveil yourself, for the stranger cannot truly see your face;
You are too exalted to be seen by the unworthy.
(Sa'di, 1363: 600)

The culmination of this process is a condition of inward contentment. The lover who possesses the beloved's presence no longer depends on the ordinary signs of seasonal pleasure or worldly abundance:

Longing to see the beloved, we care nothing for the garden;
We are at peace whether spring arrives or the autumn wind blows.
(Sa'di, 1363: 571)
Tell the gardener: if any flower remains in the garden,
Give it to someone else; I am completely content with my beloved.
(Sa'di, 1363: 571)

Earthly love thus becomes a source of freedom and happiness not because it abolishes desire, but because it reorders the lover's desires. The beloved's value displaces competing attachments and makes possible a

less possessive, less anxious, and more self-transcending form of love.

Conclusion

The examples examined in this article suggest a significant transformation in the literary representation of earthly love from early Persian lyric poetry to Sa'di. In many early poems, desire is closely tied to visible beauty, social hierarchy, possession, and the acknowledged possibility that love will end. By the twelfth century, the beloved has acquired greater emotional authority and the lover's willingness to suffer becomes a mark of devotion. Sa'di develops these tendencies further. His beloved remains recognizably human and physically attractive, but beauty is linked to character and perfection; love becomes increasingly durable; union is imagined as a form of relational completeness; and devotion to the beloved is represented as capable of weakening egocentrism, anxiety, jealousy, and excessive concern for social or religious reputation.

The central development, therefore, is not a simple replacement of earthly love by mystical love. Sa'di preserves the bodily and interpersonal dimensions of human attachment while giving them a wider ethical and spiritual horizon. The lover's transformation depends precisely on the fact that the beloved remains another human being whose beauty and value command attention beyond the lover's own interests. In this sense, Sa'di's ghazals bring the triangle of love, lover, and beloved to a distinctive equilibrium: earthly love becomes at once emotionally immediate, aesthetically idealized, and ethically formative.

Seen from this perspective, the history traced here is best understood as a redistribution of value within the love relationship. In the earliest examples, the lover's social position and access to the beloved often structure the poem, while beauty is treated as powerful but perishable. In the transitional lyric of the twelfth century, the beloved acquires greater independence and the lover learns to endure refusal, distance, and pain. In Sa'di, these tendencies culminate in a relationship in which the beloved's beauty is connected with inner worth and the lover's fidelity becomes a measure of his own ethical development.

This reading also clarifies why Sa'di's earthly love can sound at once sensual and spiritual. The sensual element is not an obstacle that must be discarded before higher meaning can emerge. It is the point of departure. The body, the face, the voice, the pain of absence, and the joy of union generate the emotional intensity from which more general claims about devotion become possible. Sa'di's achievement lies in preserving the human scale of the encounter while allowing that encounter to illuminate larger questions of selfhood, value, freedom, and happiness.

Accordingly, the movement from early lyric poetry to Sa'di should not be described as a simple progression from "low" physical desire to "high" spiritual love. Such a hierarchy would obscure the complexity of both periods. What changes is the poetic organization of desire: the beloved becomes more authoritative, the lover more vulnerable, love more durable, and the consequences of loving more ethically significant. Sa'di's ghazals give this reorganization one of its most persuasive classical forms.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to Dr. Ehya Amalsaleh (Department of English, Shiraz

University of Medical Sciences) for her careful English-language editing of an earlier version of the manuscript and for her valuable comments and suggestions.

References

Anvari. (1364). *Divan-e Anvari* [Collected poems of Anvari] (M. T. Modarres Razavi, Ed.). Bongah-e Tarjomeh va Nashr-e Ketab.

Brookshaw, D. P. (2009). Love and desire in pre-modern Persian poetry and prose. Iranian Studies, 42(5), 673–675. https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860903305988

Farrokhi Sistani. (1380). *Divan-e Farrokhi* [Collected poems of Farrokhi] (M. Dabir Siyaqi, Ed.). Zavvar.

Hafez. (1377). *Divan-e Hafez* [Collected poems of Hafez] (H. W. Clarke, Trans.). Booteh.

Khaqani Shervani. (1373). *Divan-e Khaqani* [Collected poems of Khaqani] (Z. Sajjadi, Ed.). Zavvar.

Oufi. (1382). *Lobab al-albab* [The pith of piths] (J. Sho'ar, Ed.). Elmi va Farhangi.

Sa'di. (1363). *Kolliyat-e Sa'di* [Complete works of Sa'di] (M. A. Foroughi, Ed.). Amir Kabir.

Zahir Faryabi. (1387). *Divan-e Zahir Faryabi* [Collected poems of Zahir Faryabi] (A. Behdarvand, Ed.). Qatreh.