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The celebrated Persian Sufi poet, Sa'd al-Din Mahmud Ibn 'Abd al-Karim Yahya Shabistari (d. after 1340 CE) was born in the last half of the thirteenth century at Shabistar, a small village northwest of Tabriz, located a few miles inland from Lake Urumiya in present-day province of eastern Adharbayjan in Iran. Almost nothing is known of his life, wife, children or family ancestors. According to his own admission, he spent many years of his life travelling through Egypt, Turkey and Arabia in pursuit of knowledge. However, from his frequent references to other poets and mystics of Tabriz in his *Sa'adat-nama* (Book of Felicity), it is evident that most of his life was passed in Tabriz, one of the main centres of Persian literary culture and mysticism in Mongol Persia.

Author of two books of mystical poetry and a single theosophical treatise, Shabistari is famed mainly for his 1000-line Sufi poem *Gulshan-i raz* (Garden of Mystery), which he composed in December 1317 in rhyming couplets amounting to about one thousand distiches. This poem was written in response to seventeen queries concerning various intricacies of Sufi metaphysics posed to the Sufi masters of Adharbayjan by another great Sufi of his day, Rukn al-Din Husayni Harawi (d. 718 AH / 1318 CE).

Composed in a highly symbolic language, and drawing upon the lexicon of several centuries of Persian symbolic poetry, the *Garden of Mystery* sets forth the *dicta* of the Sufis on a variety of themes such as 'Thought' (*fikr*), 'the Soul' (*nafs*), 'Knowledge' (*ma'rifat*), Multiplicity and Unity of the Realms of Being, Hierarchical Levels of Being, the Spiritual Voyage (*sayr*) and Methodical Progression on the Sufi Path (*suluk*), nearness (*qurb*) and distance from God (*bu'd*), and the evolution of the soul. It was one of the most frequently commented upon works in all of Persian Sufi literature; by the middle of the sixteenth century close to thirty commentaries had been written upon it by a number of Persian mystics, both renowned and obscure, the most important of these being the *Mafatih al-i'jaz fi sharh-i Gulshan-i raz* by Muhammad Lahiji (d. 1507 CE).

The poem was first brought to the attention of Western Orientalists by the French travellers Chardin and Bernier, who visited Persia in the seventeenth century and reported the poem's reputation in learned circles there as a 'somme théologique'. A précis of the poem was subsequently translated into Latin in 1821 by Tholuck in his *Sufismus*, later to be followed in 1825 by his translation into German of a third of the poem in his 'Bluthensammlung aus der Morgenlandischen Mystik'. The *Gulshan-i raz* entered into the mainstream of Western Islamic studies when the Persian text was published in 1838 with a German verse translation by J. von Hammer-Purgstall. In 1880, this text was revised and collated with several manuscripts omitted by Hammer and republished in England accompanied by an English translation by E.H. Whinfield. It has since been translated into English several times, although none of these translations have added anything substantial to Whinfield's rendition.

Shabistari's only other Sufi poetic epic was the *Sa'adat-nama* (Book of Felicity), a work largely devoted to the deliberate poeticisation of subjects which properly belong to the science of *kalam*, Islamic philosophical theology. He composed a single theosophical treatise, the *Haqq al-yaqin*, divided into eight chapters (*abwab*, 'Gates', corresponding to the eight Gates of Paradise), each of which is between two to five pages in length. These 'Gates', in turn, are subdivided into discrete paragraphs with a separate lemma heading the text. Some of the lemmata typically featured include Reality (*haqiqat*) - An Illustration (*tamthil*) - Nota Bene (*tabura*) - Corollary (*far'*) - Inference (*natija*) - A Subtle Mystery (*sirr-i nazuk*) - Natural Consequence (*lazima*) - Beneficial Proposition (*fayida*) - Subtlety (*daqiqqa*). The book is thus subdivided into small passages, some of which are only a short paragraph in size, expounding a philosophical point or metaphysical truth, followed by a citation from



the Qur'an. Neither the *Sa'adat-nama* nor the *Haqq al-yaqin* have been translated into any European language.

A follower of Ibn al-'Arabi, all the poetic and prose work of Shabistari shows a peerless flair for metaphysical penetration combined with an aphoristic skill in synthesising intricate dilemmas of Islamic theological and theosophical thought. He is unrivalled by any other medieval Persian Sufi poet in brevity of output and profundity of content. While in the *Garden of Mystery* Shabistari embraces without reservation the teachings of Ibn al-'Arabi, in the *Sa'adat-nama* he is more cautious and raises certain objections to him, relying mainly on al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE). His religious orientation (as well as the outlook of some of his contemporary Kubrawi masters – Nur al-Din Isfarayini, Semnani and Maghribi (d. 810/1408) – reflected that of Kubrawi Sufi Order, to which he probably belonged. He adhered to a philosophical tradition followed by Sufis, theologians and philosophers alike; a tradition which emphasises that knowledge can be attained by one or a combination of three means: (1) revelation (*wahy*), (2) reason (*'aql*) and (3) *kashf* (unveiling), corresponding to the methods pursued respectively by the theologians, philosophers and Sufis. In the works of later Persian mystical philosophers ranging from the fourteenth to the twentieth century, such as Sa'in al-Din Turkah (Ibn Turka) Isfahani (d. c. 830 / 1427), Mulla Sadra (d. 1050 / 1640), 'Abd al-Razzaq Lahiji (d. 1072 / 1661-2), Mulla 'Abdullah Zunuzi (d. 1257 / 1841), Hadi Sabzwari (d. 1295/1878), verses from Shabistari's *Gulshan-i raz* are frequently cited to illustrate metaphysical concepts and encapsulate their views on the subtler points of ontology, ethics or epistemology.

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