

# Imam Ghazali's Influence on Persian Ethical Literature: A Study of "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat"

Afsa M. Kadri

Assistant Professor, Urdu-Persian Dept., Gujarat Arts and Science College, Ahmedabad-380001

## Abstract:

Among the brightest minds in Islamic thought lies the grandeur of Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), whose contributions by far have been the most widespread in the prominent fields of theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and mysticism. Among the treasures of his prolific undertakings, one may find his well-known work "Kimiya-e-Saadat" (translated as "The Alchemy of Happiness") written in Persian. This academic article delves deep into Ghazali's critical role in Persian ethical writings by analyzing Kimiya-e-Saadat in exploring the historical and cultural background of Persian literature during his period by sensing the amalgamation of Sufi mysticism, Islamic jurisprudence, and his pragmatic methodology in moral values. The treatise is structured along four central themes, manifestly enunciated in Kimiya-e-Saadat: self-consciousness, knowledge of God, understanding the world, and knowledge of the world after this life. Each of these has been critically elaborated on in the treatise by Ghazali through his use of Quranic exegesis, prophetic traditions, and reflections on the matter in a philosophical way. More than just a presentation of the essentials of his teachings, however, is how this article makes possible an understanding of Ghazali through the expositions of his style and techniques used to persuade: through anecdotes, parables, dialogues, and practical advice that make his sophisticated ideas comprehensible and interesting. The article also presents the natural connection that lies between Kimiya-ye Saadat and those Persian authors who came after Al-Ghazali directly through it—such as Saadi and Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi—and also through the influence it had on Sufi literature. A comparative study with the finest ethical literature available in Persian — for example, "Gulistan" by Saadi and "Masnavi" by Rumi — only shows that Kimiya-e-Saadat is an entirely different kind of work that addresses other ethical issues. The present research portrays how Imam Ghazali incorporated his knowledge of Islamic sciences into one unitary ethical platform, i.e., Kimiya-e-Saadat. The current study shows that Kimiya-e-Saadat has stayed relevant in today's Persian ethical literature. It often acts as a book of human psychology, thus indicating the author's thorough knowledge of human nature and his potential to express, in very plain and practical words, even the most complex and abstruse ethical meanings and interpretations.

## 1. Introduction

Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), also known as Al-Ghazali, has been an outstanding figure in the Islamic world of philosophical enlightenment. His works discuss many topics, primarily based on refining the inner selves and delving further into our consciousness through contemplation of the heart and soul. He also has compiled a variety of books that are typically based on discussing the phases of life in this world, the phase of death, and the eternal life of the hereafter. One of his most notable contributions is his book "The Alchemy of Happiness"

(penned in Persian as "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat"), which tells its readers the hidden secrets behind happiness by giving a profound exploration of ethical and spiritual principles. This study is an attempt to review and evaluate Ghazali's influence on Persian ethical literature by cumulatively examining "Kimiya-e Sa'adat" which covers the historical and cultural context of Persian literature in Ghazali's Islamic knowledge. It also discusses his scholarly contribution, as well as a list of particular studies on "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" and its upon the later Persian ethical literature.

The 11th and 12th centuries in Persia were characterized by influential political-cultural events, particularly due to the influence of the Seljuk Emperor. This era is termed the Golden Age of Islam, when there was great development in arts, sciences, and literature. Eminent Persian poets like Rumi, Ferdowsi, and Omar Khayyam made an important contribution that enriched Persian literature during this period, creating a literary tradition that combined the pre-Islamic heritage of Persia with Islamic influences (Renard 1996; Meisami 1999). During that time, The Seljuk rulers extended their patronage to scholars and poets, thereby fostering an intellectual environment that eventually influenced artistic pursuits. It was amid this cultural renaissance that the ethos of Ghazali's texts, which were deeply affected by both religious and philosophical undercurrents, could sprout, and within this larger historical and cultural matrix, one must view his contribution to Persian literature (Lewisohn 1999). Combining Islamic scholarship with Persian literary traditions helped spread ethical and philosophical teachings. Ultimately, Persian literature provided the extant theological and moral ideas that enriched the region's cultural landscape (Meisami 1999). Imam Ghazali wrote in almost all fields of Islamic learning that span theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, and mysticism. Although his well-known book "Ihya' Ulum al-Din" (Revival of the Religious Sciences) remains a definitive guide to Islamic teachings, his Persian work "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" has not been systematically appraised in Western scholarship despite its significance (Watt 1963; Nasr 2006).

Ghazali is known for combining Sufi mysticism with Islamic jurisprudence. He tried to reconcile Islam's inward and spiritual aspects with its outward legalistic application. This was most clear in "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat," where he stresses that an individual looks for inner purification and ethical conduct, which does not simply help with religious obligation but also upright conduct (Dabashi 2006). Ghazali's approach to Sufism was unique because he wanted the practices of mystical devotionism within reach of ordinary Muslims. In that way, he democratized what was then an elitist form of spiritual practice by making it accessible to all who desired its benefits (Nasr 2006). His works have been critical to the practical approaches to ethics in which his advice is straightforward and applicable to anyone, making his messages universal. This pragmatic view is characteristic of Kimiya-e-Sa'adat, an essay providing guidance on ethical and spiritual matters (Lewisohn 1999).

His focus on the ethics of universalizing principles is a reaction to what he viewed as moral and spiritual challenges then confronting humanity. His works prescribe detailed regulations on moral behavior that focus on the fact that genuine knowledge could only be feasible if it is morally acceptable because actual knowledge must bring ethical conduct (Field, 1910). His numerous writings touch upon theological and philosophical questions in great detail that reflect Ghazali's deep involvement in the tradition of Islamic learning. It took on these big

theological questions like the realities in human suffering, the problem of evil, and the nature of God. His works, like "Tahafut al-Falasifa" (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), criticize philosophical views that his contemporary thinkers, particularly Avicenna and other Islamic philosophers, had propounded. (Griffel, 2009) In *Kimiya-e-Sa'adat*, Ghazali incorporates these theological and philosophical insights into a unified system of ethics by using his philosophical reasoning to support his ethical teachings (Nasr 2006).

## **2. Themes in "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat"**

"Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" primarily has four themes: Self-knowledge, knowledge of God, knowledge of the world, and knowledge of the hereafter. Each theme is analyzed by a combination of Qur'anic exegesis, prophetic traditions, and Ghazali's philosophical insights.

### **(a) Self-Knowledge**

For Ghazali, the basis of his theory of ethics are only by self-knowledge. He signifies that one should know one's own self and essence, especially one's vices and virtues, before engaging in spiritual growth. Ghazali puts forward the concept of the soul, ego, and heart, as well as self-awareness, which contributes to introspective purification (Ghazali 1910). Self-knowledge is knowing your own limitations and qualities and how the ego manipulates rebellion in real life through spiritual self-improvement. To convey these concepts, Ghazali uses numerous metaphors and analogies that speak his reader's common language (Field 1910).

### **(b) Knowledge of God**

The second theme revolves around the knowledge of God. Ghazali explores the attributes of God, the importance of faith, and the means through which believers can cultivate a closer relationship with the divine. He uses analogies and metaphors to explain complex theological concepts in an accessible manner (Field, 1910).

Ghazali emphasizes the importance of experiential knowledge of God, which goes beyond intellectual understanding. He encourages believers to seek a direct and personal experience of the divine through prayer, contemplation, and ethical living (Smith, 1944).

### **(c) Knowledge of the World**

Ghazali provides a nuanced analysis of the material world, cautioning against excessive attachment to worldly pleasures while advocating for a balanced approach that allows for the fulfillment of necessary worldly duties. He addresses issues such as wealth, poverty, and ethical conduct in daily life (Smith, 1944).

He critiques materialism and advocates for a life of moderation, where one fulfills their worldly responsibilities without becoming enslaved by material desires. Ghazali's approach to the material world is deeply ethical, emphasizing the importance of justice, generosity, and compassion (Griffel, 2009).

### **(d) Knowledge of the Hereafter**

The final theme addresses the afterlife, emphasizing the importance of preparing for it through righteous living, ethical conduct, and spiritual practices. Ghazali describes the stages of the

afterlife, the concept of accountability, and the ultimate goal of attaining divine pleasure (Griffel, 2009).

Ghazali's teachings on the hereafter are designed to instill a sense of moral responsibility and spiritual urgency in his readers. He provides detailed descriptions of the afterlife to motivate ethical behavior and spiritual striving in this life (Nasr, 2006).

### **3. Literary Style and Rhetorical Strategies**

Ghazali employs various rhetorical strategies in "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" to engage and instruct his readers. These include anecdotes, parables, dialogues, and practical advice, making complex ideas more relatable and easier to understand.

#### **Anecdotes and Parables**

Ghazali frequently uses stories and parables to illustrate moral and ethical points. These narratives make his teachings more vivid and memorable, enhancing their impact on readers (Lewisohn, 1999). The use of anecdotes and parables allows Ghazali to convey complex ethical teachings in a simple and engaging manner. These stories often draw from everyday life, making them relatable to a wide audience (Field, 1910).

#### **Dialogue**

Presenting teachings in the form of dialogues clarifies points and anticipates potential objections from readers. This method creates a dynamic and interactive text that engages the audience effectively (Field, 1910). Dialogues in "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" serve to dramatize ethical dilemmas and theological debates, making the text more engaging and intellectually stimulating. They also reflect Ghazali's pedagogical approach, which emphasizes active engagement with the reader (Smith, 1944).

#### **Practical Advice**

The works by Al Ghazali are full of practical advice on how ethical and spiritual principles should be adapted to life. Such an approach increases the accessibility and relevance of Ghazali's teachings (Smith, 1944). Ghazali advises at great length on every subject of life, from personal conduct to social responsibilities, making his ethical teaching reasonably practical and honest. This stress has made "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" somewhat different from abstract philosophical works (Griffel, 2009).

### **4. Influence on Persian Ethical Literature.**

The impact of "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" on ethical literature in Persian is first felt through its direct influence on later writers and then by its large-scale absorption into Sufi literature.

Later, Persian writers and poets directly drew upon Ghazali's ethical thought. For instance, the works of Saadi, "Gulistan" and "Bustan," indicate a core of ethics and moral wisdom similar to the writings of Al Ghazali (Pourjavady, 2010). In particular, Saadi was influenced by Ghazali's stress on practical ethics and moral wisdom. Indeed, his works, "Gulistan" and "Bustan," certainly intersect with Ghazali's issues regarding ethics, justice, and compassion and

prove to have acted similarly within Persian literature. Ghazali's emphasis on inner purification and spiritual development resonated deeply with the Sufi tradition. His works influenced Sufi poets such as Rumi and Attar, who incorporated Ghazalian themes into their poetry (Lewisohn, 1999). Rumi's "Masnavi," for example, reflects Ghazali's themes of inner purification, divine love, and spiritual journey. Ghazali's integration of Sufism with ethical teachings provided a foundation for later Sufi literature, which continued to explore these themes in poetic and mystical forms (Nasr, 2006).

"Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" became a staple in Islamic educational institutions, shaping the moral and spiritual education of generations of Persian-speaking Muslims. Its practical and accessible style made it an essential text for teaching ethics and spirituality (Griffel, 2009). The text's use in madrasas and other educational institutions ensured that Ghazali's ethical teachings were disseminated widely, influencing the moral and spiritual development of countless students and scholars. This educational impact further cemented Ghazali's influence on Persian ethical literature (Smith, 1944).

### 5. Comparative Analysis with Other Ethical Works

By contrast with other renowned ethical works of Persian literature, these make clear Ghazali's characteristic stance and the specificity of his vision in comparing Kimiya-e-Sa'adat. **Saadi's "Gulistan" and "Bustan"**

Both works bear the influence of Ghazali in terms of their focus on ethical living and practical sagacity. Still, it is here that the more comprehensive ethical framework of Ghazali, coming from his theological depth and emphasis on spiritual purification, is set on display (Pourjavady, 2010). In Saadi's work, one feels more of an aura of practical wisdom and ethical anecdotes. At the same time, Ghazali's "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" is combined with a more profound theological and philosophical reflection. This wedding of practical and theoretical insights makes Ghazali's work unique in Persian ethical literature (Lewisohn, 1999).

### Rumi's "Masnavi"

Rumi fuses inner purification and divine love from Ghazali's themes into his poetic narratives. Though much more mystical and poetical, Ghazali's prose contrasted the mysticism of Rumi with a structured and systematic exposition that spelled out ethical principles in a far more accessible fashion (Lewisohn, 1999). The "Masnavi" of Rumi develops themes based on Ghazali ideology but expresses them in much more lyrical and allegorical forms. Hence, the poetic and mystical dimensions of Rumi's work complement rather than contrast with Ghazali's didacticism and systematization, enriching Persian ethical literature together (Nasr, 2006).

### 6. Theological and Philosophical Underpinnings

Exploring the theological and philosophical underpinnings of "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" reveals Ghazali's integration of various Islamic disciplines into a cohesive ethical framework. Ghazali's work reflects his Ash'arite theological background, emphasizing divine omnipotence and the importance of faith. He addresses theological issues such as free will, predestination, and the nature of divine justice (Griffel, 2009). His theological framework is deeply rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith, which he interprets through the lens of Ash'arite theology. Ghazali's



emphasis on divine omnipotence and the importance of faith underpins his ethical teachings, providing a theological foundation for his practical advice (Field, 1910).

Ghazali's engagement with Islamic philosophy, particularly his critique of the philosophers in works like "Tahafut al-Falasifa," informs his ethical teachings. He incorporates philosophical reasoning to support his ethical and spiritual principles (Nasr, 2006). His philosophical insights are evident in his discussions of the nature of the soul, the relationship between reason and faith, and the ethical implications of philosophical doctrines. Ghazali's ability to synthesize philosophical and theological perspectives enriches his ethical teachings and enhances their intellectual rigor (Griffel, 2009).

## 7. Conclusion

Imam Ghazali's "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" represents a significant contribution to Persian ethical literature, blending Islamic theological insights with practical ethical guidance. Through its exploration of self-knowledge, knowledge of God, the material world, and the hereafter, the work provides a comprehensive framework for ethical and spiritual living. Ghazali's accessible style and pragmatic approach ensured that his teachings resonated with a broad audience, leaving a lasting impact on Persian literary and ethical traditions.

The enduring relevance of "Kimiya-e-Sa'adat" in Persian ethical literature is a testament to Ghazali's profound understanding of human nature and his ability to communicate complex ethical principles in a clear and engaging manner. His integration of theological, philosophical, and mystical insights creates a rich tapestry of ethical teachings that continue to inspire and guide readers across generations.

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