



ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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## Illustration of alcohol use in classical Farsi-Dari (Persian) literature

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### ABSTRACT

Alcohol has been known to people of Central Asia for millennia, and in line with local mythology, wine was used as an anaesthetic for the Caesarean birth of the mythical hero Rostam. In classical Farsi-Dari (Persian) literature, the term alcohol and/or wine is used in two different contexts; firstly, as an allegory; referring to a 'divine wine' and as a source of spiritual intoxication bringing the consumer closer to his Creator. This school of thoughts is symbolised by Rumi and Sufi poets; secondly, as a source of physical intoxication, bringing the drinker happiness and the ability to forget about everyday concerns. This school of opinions is represented by Khayyam and Manuchehri. From a religious point of view, alcohol is described as "the mother of all evil". Nevertheless, there are also a lot of those, who praise wine for its hypnotic properties describing it as 'a remedy for sleepless nights', or for its anxiolytic characteristics, 'taking away worries and bringing peace to one's mind'; and notably for its antidepressant effects declaring 'there is nothing better than wine to banish sadness'. The aim of this paper is to review Persian literature of Central Asia and neighbouring regions between the 10th and 14th centuries with the focus on alcohol and its illustration in the works of influential authors of the period, including Rudaki, Manuchehri, Khayyam, Rumi, Hafez, etc.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received May 30, 2020  
Accepted June 07, 2020  
Published June 23, 2020

### KEYWORDS

Alcohol, wine, Farsi-Dari, Persian, Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia, self-medication, anxiety, depression.

### Introduction

Alcohol is forbidden in Islam and described as "the mother of all vice" or "the deadliest of the deadliest sins" [1]. Abu Sahl Hamdawī of Balkh describes alcohol as 'the introduction of the book of debauchery, the padlock of the doors of morality and permanent drinking is the foundation of aberration.' In his view, 'adoration of alcohol is the beginning of hatred, and anyone who sits on the beast of alcohol is categorically a deviant' [2]. Notwithstanding of its official prohibition, post-Islamic Persian literature of the period between 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century Anno Domini (AD); reflecting a relatively thriving socio-economic environment alongside a relative freedom indicates that alcohol was relatively freely consumed, especially by nobilities and rulers, as well as by intellectuals. There were taverns ('sharabkhana, maykadah, maykhana') owned largely by Zoroastrians and other non-Muslims that were recurrently visited [3]. Words such as 'may' (wine), 'mast' (drunk), 'sharabkhana' (tavern) alongside the 'sāqhee' (cupbearer) and 'shāhed' (beauty) are probably the most common words used in classical Persian literature. The use of terms and pseudonyms for wine such as 'Aab e aatash noma' – fire-showing water ; 'Aab e atashin' – firing water; 'Aab e haram' – the prohibited water; 'Aab e torab' - water of joy; 'Aaftaab e zard' - yellow sun; 'Aatash e be dud' - smokeless fire; 'Aatash e mahlul' - liquefied fire; 'Aatash e sayaal' - fire of the soul; 'Aatash e toba soz' – the repentance-burning water; 'Aqhiqh e nab' – pure onyx; 'Arous e khaak' – bride of the soil; 'Ashk e taak' - tear of grape tree; 'Barqh' – electricity; 'Dokhtar e aaftaab' – sun's daughter;

'Dokhtar e gham' – daughter of sadness; 'Esaā ye har dard' – Jesus for every pain; 'Gol e neshaat' – the flower of happiness; 'Hez e arous' - the blood of the bride; 'Jaan bakhsh' – the exhilarator; 'Khoun e kabouter' – blood of the dove; 'Khoun e khaam' – raw blood; 'Khoun e naamous' – the blood of honour; 'Kimya ye jan' – elixir of soul; 'Pardah soz' – the veil-burner; 'Rish e qhaazi' – the judge's beard; 'Ruh parwar' – the soul-nourisher; 'Sang e mehak' – the touchstone (benchmark); 'Tolqh e rawaan' – the elixir of the soul; 'Zabaan band e kherad' – the tongue-clamper of sense [4], etc. are a clear testimony of alcohol being a desired beverage and broadly consumed.

### Methods and Objectives

This is a literature review of Persian poetry and prose focusing on alcohol and its illustration in the works of influential authors of the period, including Rudaki, Manuchehri, Khayyam, Jalaluddin Balkhī (Rumi), Hafez, etc. This paper aims to examine representations of alcohol use in classical Farsi-Dari (Persian) literature between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century AD in Afghanistan, Iran and bordering regions of Central Asia.

### Results

#### Alcohol representation in local mythology and the pre-Islamic era

As reported by the Zoroastrian holy descriptions from around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the drinking of wine was a relatively common phenomenon in Central Asia and the Middle East. Therefore, Zoroastrian religious authorities recommended moderate

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drinking; 'if you drink, drink moderately and like wise men, because from excessive drinking, sins will grow as plants from the spring rain' [1]. Wine was produced in Kapisa near Bagram, north of Kabul (the summer capital of the Kushan Empire) from the 2nd century AD until 10th century AD, and was exported to India [5-8].

As claimed by Abul Qásem Firdausi (c. 940-1020 AD, Tus, Iran), the author of the *Sháhnáma* (Book of Kings) wine was consumed in ancient Iranian territories for millennia and people of the region knew wine even before the discovery of fire. As stated by Firdausi, after the accidental discovery of fire by king Hushang and him believing the fire being given to him as a gift from God; the king ordered his people to worship fire and that very night 'they had a feast and drank wine' [9,10]. Corresponding to the legend, the discovery of fire was subsequently annually celebrated as the festival of fire "Saddah" (century), which has still been celebrated in some parts of the Middle East and Central Asia. Alcohol was consumed during festivals, including the festival of 'Nau Roz' or New Year until the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD when it was forbidden by king Bahram, the fifteenth king of the Sasanian Empire [9,10]. As narrated by Firdausi, king Bahram had forbidden the wine following an incident when one of his noblemen, called Kebrui, whilst drunk and asleep, a black raven pecked his eyes out. Wine was forbidden for a year until; a shoemaker's son married a rich woman. But the shoemaker's boy had erectile dysfunction, so his mother advised him to "drink some wine and when you feel you are ready, go to her again; you will break her steal once you two are alone - a pickaxe made of felt cannot split a stone". The boy drank wine, and the fire of passion flared up in him immediately. The wine made him bold and he was able to open the recalcitrant door. It happened that a lion had escaped from the king's lion's den and was wandering around. The cobbler's son, still drunk, ran out and sat on the roaring lion's back and hung on by grasping hold of the animal's ear. When king Bahram heard of this, he was astonished and inquired what kind of man he was. The boy's mother told the king what had happened; "This boy of mine is just starting out on life; He had found himself a satisfactory wife. Nonetheless, when the time came, well, his implementation was just too soft, and he was impotent. So, I gave the boy three glasses of good wine to make him the father of a family. The flappy felt stirred, lifted its head, and turned into a strong, hard bone instead. Three drafts of wine gave him his strength and glory." The king laughed at the woman's word and allowed wine consumption again. Nevertheless, he advised that "a man may drink wine if he is aware of his own capacity. When wine leads you to pleasure, see that it does not leave your body weak and incapable" [9,10,1]. Firdausi indicates that alcohol was also used for its anaesthetic and sedative properties, for medicinal purposes. In accordance with *Sháhnáma*, alcohol was utilised for the Caesarean birth of the mythical hero Rostam. As narrated by Firdausi, Rudabah, the princess of Kabul, was pregnant with her baby Rostam; however, as Rostam was a large baby suffering from foetal macrosomia, she could not labour physiologically. Hence "a skilled priest came and made the lovely Rudabah drunk wine. She felt no pain as he cut open her side and turned the baby's head towards the opening. He brought the child forth so painlessly that no one in the world had ever seen such a wonder" [9,10].

### Illustrations of alcohol use by rulers and nobilities

Despite its official prohibition, wine often appears to be consumed by rulers and aristocrats of the region. King Kaykawus bin Eskanadr bin Qābus bin Vashmgir (1021 AD – c. 1084 AD), the Ziarid ruler of Tabarestān (north west Iran) in his *Qabusnamah* (or as *The Mirror for Princes* known in English literature), advises his son Gilānshah "as far as alcohol is concerned, I don't say drink it, but I also can't say don't drink it because young people don't take advice seriously. If you don't drink you will succeed in both worlds. Besides you would not be subject to public criticism. However, if you drink try to repent, ask God for forgiveness, and express your regret about drinking. If you do not know how to drink, alcohol will become venom. However, if you know how to drink, it will become an antitoxin" [11].

As claimed by Abul Fadl Baihaqī (995-1077 AD) the author of the *Tārīkh-e Baihaqī* or *The History of Beyhaqi*, written by that provides information on the ruling dynasties of the region such as the Samanids, Ghurids, Buyids and mainly the powerful Ghaznavid empire, ruling a vast region of nowadays Afghanistan, Iran, North India and Transoxiana, wine is consumed by rulers and aristocrats during the state holidays, post victorious conquests, but also just for fun [12]. Baihaqī gives a rather shocking illustration of a feast of wine and merriment by Abu Sahl Zuzani, chief secretary of Sultan Mas'ud Ghazanwi organised after the execution of the famous statesman, Hasanak the Vizier (Hasanak Mikāili). Hasanak the Vizier served Sultan Mahmud Ghaznawi from 1024 AD to 1030 AD. Nevertheless, he was later charged with infidelity and in the year 1032 AD, he was executed by hanging in Balkh, Afghanistan. It is believed that Abu Sahl Zuzani was Hasanak's opponent and played an essential role in the conspiracy against him. Following his death, Abu Sahl took Hasanak's position. Baihaqī describes, "I heard that one day he (Bu Sahl) was drinking wine; he prepared a big party; with several slaves serving and the musicians singing. He (Bu Sahl) ordered that Hasanak's head is secretly brought in and put in a platter covered. He asked the guests whether they wished to have some fresh fruits. Everybody said yes, we would have some. He said, bring it; they brought the dish, and when they took off the cover, they were all astonished. Bu Sahl laughed, and from the glass of wine he had in his hand, poured some on to the garden. They took the head (of Hasanak) away. When we met the following day, I criticised him for what he had done, he (Bu Sahl) replied to me, oh you Abul Hasan (Baihaqī), you have the heart of a chicken; that is what one should do with the enemy's head" [12, 13].

Perhaps one of the most tragic examples of binge drinking and self-medication with alcohol is a week-long binge drinking of the Ghurid king Sultan Ala'ud-Din Husayn, nicknamed "Jahān Soz" (The World Burner), who ruled central parts of Afghanistan from 1149 AD to 1161 AD. When Ala'ud Din's brother Sayf al-Din ascended the throne, he divided the Ghurid kingdom between his brothers, Qutbud-Din and Ala'ud Din. Qutbud-Din, whose capital was Firozkuh (Ghor, Afghanistan), had quarrels with his brothers and took refuge in Ghazna, the capital of Bahramshah, the last Ghaznavid king who ruled from 1117 AD to 1152 AD [14]. Bahramshah at first treated Qutbud-Din as an honoured guest, but subsequently, his suspicion being aroused by intriguers he poisoned Qutbud-Din. To avenge his brother

Outbud-Din, in 1148 AD, Sayfud-Din marched on Ghazna with a large army; Bahramshah fled to India. Sayfud-Din occupied the city, took possession of the throne and soon disbanded a great part of his army. On the approach of winter, when the roads to Ghor were blocked with snow, and the arrival of the reinforcements was impossible, Bahramshah, at the instigation of his subjects, suddenly returned to Ghazna, took Sayfud-Din and his followers captive, and put them to death in the year 1149/1150 AD. Sultan Ala'ud Din Husayn (Jahan Soz) furious at the loss of the second brother, sent a threatening quatrain to the chief judge of Ghazna and assembled a large army, marched on Ghazna and proceeded to make good his threats. He defeated Bahramshah and compelled him to return to India. Sultan Ala'ud-Din (The World Burner) occupied Ghazna and, for seven days and nights, gave it up to slaughter, pillage and destruction. Bosworth [15] referring to Juwzjani's "Tabaqāt-i Nāseri", estimates the total number of people killed to be more than 60,000 people. Sultan Ala'ud-Din killed the men, took captive the women and children, and caused the bodies of all the kings of Ghazna except those of Sultan Mahmud, Sultan Masoud and Sultan Ibrahim, to be exhumed and burned. During the seven days of massacre and plunder, he was drinking and making merry in the royal palace of Ghazna. At the end of this period, when he put a stop to the slaughter, he ordered his minstrels to sing verses that he had composed for the occasion [16]. "The world knows that I am the king of the world. I am the light of the dynasty of Abbasyans. I am Ala'ud Din Husayn, son of Husayn; long live my kingdom. When I sit on the throne of reign; no matter on earth or sky, like Alexander (the Great), I conquer the entire world; in every state, I appoint a new ruler. Because of the thugs of Ghazna; like the river Nile, I create a river of blood" [17]. After spending another week in mourning for his brothers, he returned to Ghor destroying on his way all the fine buildings erected by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna [15-17].

### Illustrations of alcohol use for self-medication

Abdullah Rudaki (c. 895-941 AD, Rudak, Tajikistan) the 'father' of Farsi-Dari literature outlines 'wine reveals a man's honour: the true nature of a person; wine separates a man of good nature from bad nature, and wine reveals whether a person is astute or injudicious.' Furthermore, Rudaki praises hypnotic properties of wine, defining wine as a remedy for insomnia or "a cure for sleepless eyes" [18]. Similarly, Abul Najm Ahmad Manuchehri, (born in Damghan, Iran, died in Ghazni, Afghanistan in c.1040 AD), the famous poet in the court of Sultan Masood of Ghazna, praises wine for its hypnotic, anxiolytic and antidepressant properties. In Manuchehri's view, wine is a remedy for insomnia, saying 'the night has come, and I am tortured by sleeplessness; hey friend, bring the thing (wine) that is the remedy of my sleeplessness'. Manuchehri laments of intrigues of the world that he compares to a 'mad dog.' Hence, he shouts, "Hey wine! I devote my body and soul to you; because you have torn away the sorrow from my heart". Manuchehri advises, "you should not worry for the world in vain as your sorrow will not lessen its pain. Crush this world and have a mouthful of it, before the world squeezes and swallows you. This world is like a mad dog that would bite you; you would never catch or hit him. Ignore its plots, as you would never resolve it. Instead, pour wine into your cup as there is nothing better than wine to free man from the claws of the world' [19]. Likewise, Abul-Majd Majdud Sanai Ghaznavi (c. 1080 – 1041AD, Ghazni, Afghanistan), the great Sufi poet in the early stages of his life, wrote 'wise men found

no better remedy than wine for sadness in this terrible world.' Sanai describes wine as 'the hand of Moses, full of miracles,' or as 'having a resurrecting power of Jesus bringing the dead back to life,' or as 'wisdom; and 'food for the soul,' saying 'it is only wine that takes care of man in this miserable world' [20].

Abu'l Bath Omar Khayyam (c. 1047-1123 AD, Nishapur, Iran), the genius mathematician, astrologist, philosopher, and poet is advocating drinking, describing wine as a painkiller. Khayyam claims wine frees man from the materials and ideological concerns, stating "drink wine, as it will free you from having too little or too much, it will free you from fights of 72 nations. Do not abstain from this elixir, a gulp of which cures a thousand pains' [21, 1]. Equally, Afzalluddin Khaqhani (c.1121 AD, Shirwan, Azerbaijan, died in c.1190 AD in Tabriz, Iran) is of the view that "the only credit and capital of one's life is their youth, and the rest of life is nothing'. He appears to be suffering from depression as he admits to self-medication with wine, praising its "soul-nourishing" assets. Khaqhani calls; "give me that elixir of life; that pure wine, that soul-nourishing gem, the only medicine for my heart full of sorrow and my eyes full of tears" [1]. Ali Anwari (born in 1126 AD, Abivard, Turkmenistan, died in 1189, Balkh, Afghanistan) describes wine as the "food for man's spirit" because of its antidepressant effects and of its ability to remove the 'rust of sadness from the soul' and 'turning a housefly into a falcon' [22]. Anwari openly admits to excessive alcohol consumption, and reading his poetry one gets a sense that he may be addicted to alcohol. Anwari's poems are strongly indicative of him self-medicating with wine. Ilyas bin Yusuf Nizami, (1141-1209 AD) born in Ganja, Azerbaijan, although agrees with Anwari that "while wine cures man's sorrow', nevertheless, contrary to Anwari believes one should refrain from drinking because it will turn the falcon of a brain into a weak sparrow" [23].

Shamsuddin Mohammad Hafez (born in 1327 AD, Shiraz, Iran), the exceptional poet, who was also called the "second Khayyam" [1] because, like Khayyam, he laments about tenuousness of life affairs and its infidelity when he guides the reader: "Come, for the palace of hope (world) is mighty frail in foundation; Bring wine, for the foundation of life is on the wind. Let me give you a piece of advice; learn and practice it. Do not seek constancy in this weak-natured world; for this crone is the bride of a thousand grooms [24]. At other times, Hafez is clearly complaining of suffering from sadness, and uses alcohol to self-medicate the sorrow. He admits: "If wine did not make our heart forget its sorrow; the dread of events would carry our foundation away. If reason does not anchor itself in drunkenness; how can it pull the ship (of life) out of this maelstrom of calamity? Alas everyone loses the game secretly to the fate; no one has ever won a hand from this charlatan. I am the medicine man of love, drink wine, because this potion brings peace to your mind and takes away worries" [24]. Hafez recommends alcohol for its antidepressant properties and instructs 'If you wish to free yourself from sadness and stop your heart's bleeding'; fill your cup of wine' [25]. At times, Hafez expresses passive suicidal thoughts "I want some intoxicating wine that would knock me out; so, I may rest for a moment from the world and its troubles' [24]. Hafez complains: 'In the whirligig of life, helpless, and with bleeding heart, I am getting nowhere; Disgraced and degraded to the level of dust but cannot get a piece of loaf. If I bite once at

a bone, I get a thousand bites into my bones. I am miserable and have had enough of this life, but what can I do when the order of departure is not coming' [25]. Hafez echoes Khayyam by complaining of his hopelessness to determine the mystery of life, and helplessly turns into drinking and self-destruction when he directs to: 'The world and all its affairs are absolutely nothing; I have investigated this matter a thousand times. Woe and alas, I did not know until now that the elixir of happiness was the companion, and only the companion. Go to a safe place and appreciate the chance given to you; for the bandit (of time) is in ambush of your life' [24].

## Discussion

From a wider perspective, the term alcohol and/or wine in Farsi-Dari literature, from a wider standpoint is used in two contexts; firstly, as a symbol, essentially by Sufi poets who refer to a 'divine wine' and as a source of mystical intoxication; 'Behold the body's house, and look at my soul; this made drunken and that desolate by the cup of His love. When the host of the tavern became my heartmate; my blood turned into wine and my heart to kebab; when the eye is filled with the thought of him, a voice arrives: well done, o flagon, and bravo, wine! [26]. Secondly, as a source of physical drunkenness, bringing to the user pleasure, exhilaration and the ability to disregard everyday trepidations; Khayyam and Manuchehri are the key representatives of this perspective. It seems that Persian speaking poets glorifying wine, were familiar with and influenced by Arabic literature and follow their Arab predecessors like Maymun ibn Qays Al-a'sha (c 570– 625 AD, Riyadh) who believes "people have not found anything better than alcohol for repulsing sadness [27] or Abul-Abass Anbari the 10<sup>th</sup> century poet who doubts alcohol prohibition saying; "the words they say about wine, ignore (them) since drinking of wine is halal to people, God forbids intoxication, not its drinking; (so), Abul-Abas enjoy drinking" [28].

## Conclusion

Alcohol is unlawful and labelled as the 'mother of all evil.' Nevertheless, despite such a reputation and being illegal, it emerges that with relatively prosperous socio-economic conditions and social freedom, alcohol (wine) was freely consumed, not only by rulers and nobilities, but also as social drinking amongst intellectuals. The classical Farsi-Dari literature consistently records wine being used for self-medication and glorified for its anxiolytic, hypnotic, and mainly antidepressant properties. Wine is described as 'medicine for sleepless eyes,' or as a remedy that helps people 'to forget sorrow, taking away worries and bringing peace to mind.'

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