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Discourse Analysis of Luqmān the Wise in the Works of Saʿdī of Shiraz

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of Luqmān the Wise in the works of Saʿdī of Shiraz through the lens of *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*. The main objective is to demonstrate how Saʿdī employs the character of Luqmān as a medium for conveying moral and educational concepts, as well as for social critique. The analysis focuses on three dimensions: narrative structure, power relations, and linguistic strategies. In this context, the concept of *ḥikma* ("wisdom") goes beyond mere knowledge: it encompasses insight, experience, and the proper application of knowledge for the attainment of virtue and human flourishing.

The study concludes that Saʿdī skilfully employs Luqmān as an ideological subject to promote practical ethics, critique power relations, and create a discursive balance between Sharīʿa and Sufism. In Saʿdī's works, Luqmān is not merely a historical figure, but a living legend through which an ethics of resistance against tyranny and materialism is continually rearticulated. This

discourse analysis thus uncovers the hidden layers of power, ideology, and resistance within Saʿdī's writings.

Keywords: Luqmān, Wisdom (*ḥikma*), Saʿdī of Shiraz, Courtesy (*adab*), Qurʾan

Introduction

وَلَقَدْ ءَاتَيْنَا لُقْمَـٰنَ ٱلْحِكْمَةَ (قرآن۳۱:۱۲)

"And indeed We granted Luqmān wisdom" (Qurʾan, 31:12).

Luqmān the Wise is a renowned figure in Islamic philosophy, mystical literature, and wisdom traditions, whose name is mentioned in the Qurʾan as well as in hadith. The great Persian poet Abū Muḥammad Muṣliḥ al-Dīn Musharraf ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn Musharraf, known as Saʿdī of Shiraz (1210-1292 CE), inspired by *Sūrat Luqmān* (Qur'an, 31), refers repeatedly to this figure in his works, especially in the *Gulistān* and the *Būstān*, drawing upon his teachings to articulate moral, pedagogical, and mystical concepts.

The meaning of *ḥikma* ("wisdom") is generally understood as a combination of deep knowledge, insight, experience, and the ability to judge rightly and act accordingly. Wisdom is not merely the possession of facts; it is the discernment of causes and the capacity to apply knowledge in life so as to attain goodness and virtue.

From different perspectives, *ḥikma* carries various connotations. In philosophy, it signifies knowledge of the realities of existence, causality, and profound insight into the world and the place of humankind within it. In mysticism and religion, it refers to the understanding of divine mysteries, knowledge of God, and awareness of the path to salvation and spiritual perfection, often closely associated with piety and righteous action. In literature and ethics,

wisdom manifests as instructive counsel, prudence in decision-making, and appropriate, rational conduct in daily life.

In short, *ḥikma* denotes the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil, and to apply this discernment in the pursuit of a more purposeful and virtuous life.

In Saʿdī's works, Luqmān appears in a number of anecdotes that reveal complex layers of discourse. The six axes of Saʿdī's discourse on Luqmān are as follows:

Learning right comportment from the discourteous: Luqmān recounts that he learned right comportment from the discourteous, a statement analysed as a strategy of discursive reversal that, through othering, reinforces moral norms.

Attaining Wisdom From the blind: Another narrative describes how Luqmān gained wisdom from the blind, who never take a step without certainty of the path ahead. This allegory functions as a discursive metaphor legitimizing rationality and prudence before action.

Hierarchical power structures: in a further story, Luqmān forgives a master who had mistaken him for his servant, transforming the status of a servant into that of a moral teacher and critiquing hierarchical power structures.

Abstaining from living in error in youth: Saʿdī narrates from Luqmān that not living at all is better than spending years in error. This saying contrasts youth with old age and invokes the sacred order of the Qurʾanic *Sūrat al-ʿAṣr* to explain the necessity of time management.

Temporality of the material world: In another tale, Luqmān tells the Angel of Death that building a house in a world where death constantly pursues humankind is folly. This dialogue constructs a

discourse of resistance against materialism and promotes the Sufi concept of asceticism.

Charity as a safeguard against injustice: Luqmān asserts that the reason thieves attacked a caravan was the travellers' failure to help the needy in times of ease. Here, the issue of collective responsibility in generating injustice is raised, and a discourse of distributive justice is advanced.

In this article, we examine the role of Luqmān the Wise in the thought and works of Saʿdī of Shiraz, as well as the wise sayings attributed to him, through the method of discourse analysis (see Safavi, 2025). All English translations of Persian poetry in this article are my own. English translations of the Qurʾan cited in this article are based primarily on *The Study Qurʾan* (Nasr et al., 2015),

Theoretical Framework

The discourse analysis in this study rests on three interrelated axes:

1. Narrative structure: the modes of representation of Luqmān in the anecdotes.
2. Power relations: the dynamics between masters and slaves, the wise and the ignorant.
3. Linguistic strategies: including allegory, contrast, and Qurʾanic allusion.

The position of Luqmān the Wise in Saʿdī's thought is examined here through the method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The theoretical framework is grounded in Norman Fairclough's model (1992), which operates across three levels: textual description, interpretation of discursive practice, and explanation of the sociocultural context. Particular emphasis is placed on two

dimensions: the reproduction of moral ideologies (Fairclough, 1995), and the interrelation of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1977) within pedagogical narratives.

This approach brings to light the hidden layers of discourse in Saʿdī's writings, revealing how Luqmān is represented as a vehicle for social critique.

1. Learning right comportment (*adab*) from the discourteous (*biadab*):

> One of the most famous anecdotes attributed to Luqmān the Wise, which Saʿdī recounts in the *Gulistān*, concerns the manner in which he acquired right comportment (*adab*):
> "Luqmān was asked: 'From whom did you learn right comportment?'
> He replied: 'From the discourteous. Whatever I found objectionable in their actions, I refrained from doing myself.'
> They speak no word in frivolity,
> From which the possessor of intellect takes no lesson.
> And though a hundred chapters of wisdom to a fool,
> Be read, they enter his ear as nothing but a plaything."
> (Saʿdī, *Gulistān*, Book II: On the Morals of Dervishes, Tale 21)

This statement illustrates the depth of Luqmān's insight and discernment. He transforms the negative behaviours of others into a source of self-cultivation, turning even unpleasant encounters into opportunities for moral refinement. The anecdote suggests that through reflection and critical awareness, a person can learn from every circumstance, even the most undesirable. Luqmān may thus be seen to enact a reflective *hermeneutic circle* that interrelates the self, society, and *ḥikma*. In this process, the actions of the self and of society are continuously observed, interpreted, and re-synthesised in dialogue with *ḥikma*, thereby generating a practical framework for ethical behaviour grounded in the sacred and temporal reality. Ethics, while rooted in the sacred, thus emerges dynamically from this hermeneutic circle, which is continually informed by temporal experience.

Discourse Analysis

1. Luqmān's utterance "I learned right comportment from the discourteous" exemplifies a strategy of discursive inversion.
2. Here, the ill-mannered function as the "degraded other," through which the discourse of right comportment is reaffirmed and reproduced.
3. The ideological function of this saying lies in the stabilization of moral norms by means of the binary opposition of "self/other." In Fairclough's terms, Luqmān's strategy of inversion operates through othering, thereby naturalizing the dominant discourse of ethics (Fairclough, 1992, p. 67).

2. Acquiring Wisdom from the Blind: The Discourse of Prudence

In the preface to the *Gulistān*, Saʿdī recounts another saying attributed to Luqmān the Sage regarding the source of his wisdom:

> "They asked Luqmān, 'From whom did you learn wisdom?' He replied, 'From the blind, for they do not take a step until they are certain of their path.'"
> (Saʿdī, *Gulistān*: Preface)

Luqmān's response delicately underscores the significance of caution, profound insight, and reflection prior to action. It is *ḥikma* in praxis. Just as a blind person must ensure the safety of the path before taking each step, wisdom operates according to the same principle. The wise person never acts in haste but chooses their course with discernment and foresight. Every action, in its various forms and at all times, requires contemplation grounded in *ḥikma*.

In the Qurʾanic conception of *al-ʿamal al-ṣāliḥ* (righteous deeds), righteous action is not merely moral correctness but the confluence of wisdom, belief and praxis. When *ḥikma* informs action, the deed achieves coherence between the sacred order and the contingencies

of lived experience. As expressed in the Qurʾan, "Verily all human beings are at loss. Except those who believe and do righteous deeds, and enjoin one another to truth and to patience" (Qur'an, 103:2-3), true righteousness integrates wisdom, contemplation, belief, and ethical conduct. The *ḥakīm* (the wise), therefore, is not only one who possesses knowledge but an ethical actor whose conduct is continually mediated by discernment.

This parable stands as a timeless lesson in contemplation and deliberation within all domains of human endeavour.

Discourse Analysis

1. The parable of the blind functions as a discursive metaphor legitimizing reason and intellection.

2. It produces a discourse of "reflection before action" as a mechanism of social regulation and moral control.

3. Qurʾanic resonance: "And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge" (Qur'an, 17:36).

3. Not Being Harsh with Subordinates: Discourse of Resistance to Power

In *Būstān*, Saʿdī recounts a touching anecdote about Luqmān that highlights the importance of humility and kind conduct toward subordinates:

1	I heard that Luqmān was black of complexion, neither corpulent, nor of delicate frame.	شنیدم که لقمان سیه‌فام بود نه تن‌پرور و نازک‌اندام بود
2	Someone thought him his very slave, considered him lowly, and set him to the task of clay.	یکی بندهٔ خویش پنداشتش زبون دید و در کارِ گل داشتش
3	He endured the injustice, bore the tyranny and wrath, within a year, a dwelling to his benefit he built.	جفا دید و با جور و قهرش بساخت به سالی س رایی ز بهرش بساخت
4	When his slave who had gone free returned to him, a cry came forth from him for his Luqman.	چو پیش آمدش بندهٔ رفته باز ز لقمانش آمد نهیبی فراز
5	He fell to his feet and apologised. Luqmān laughed, for what use is an apology?	به پایش درافتاد و پوزش نمود بخندید لقمان که پوزش چه سود؟
6	For a year, your tyranny has spilt my heart's blood; how, in one hour, can I cast it from my heart?	به سالی ز جورت جگر خون کنم به یک ساعت از دل به در چون کنم؟
7	Yet I shall still forgive, O noble man, for your profit has not brought us loss.	ولی هم ببخشایم ای نیک‌مرد که سود تو ما را زیانی نکرد
8	You have made prosper your dwelling place, wisdom and knowledge have increased for me.	تو آباد کردی شبستانِ خویش مرا حکمت و معرفت گشت بیش

9	There is a slave within my own domain, O fortunate one, whom at times I command to arduous labour.	غلامی است در خیلم ای نیک‌بخت که فرمایمش وقت‌ها کارِ سخت
10	From now I will not torment him with hardship, O heart, for I shall recall the hardship of the task of clay.	دگر ره نیازارمش سخت، دل چو یاد آیدم سختیِ کارِ گل
11	Whosoever has not borne the tyranny of the great, will find his heart unburned by the lowly oppressed.	هر آن کس که جورِ بزرگان نبُرد نسوزد دلش بر ضعیفانِ خُرد
12	If you endure harsh words from rulers, Do not be harsh to your subordinates.	گر از حاکمان سختت آید سخُن تو بر زیردستان درشتی مکُن
13	King Bahrām said wisely to his vizier: “Do not deal harshly with your subordinates.”	نکو گفت بهرام‌شه با وزیر که دشوار با زیردستان مگیر

Saʿdī, *Būstān*, Book IV, “On Humility,” Story 21 – “The Story of Luqmān the Sage”

The Tale

In this tale, Luqmān due to his dark complexion and strong build is mistaken by one of the elites for a servant and is assigned arduous manual labour. Despite the injustice and harsh treatment, he endures, Luqmān responds with patience and wisdom, building a house for the very master who oppressed him in the span of a year. When the elite’s actual servant returns and the elite expresses remorse, he is met not with resentment but with Luqmān’s wise and forgiving composure.

Smiling, Luqmān remarks that although he had borne cruelty for a year, he could not simply erase that memory in a moment; yet he chooses forgiveness, recognizing that the suffering he endured deepened his wisdom and self-knowledge.
He then offers counsel to his former master: only one who has endured hardship can truly feel compassion for the weak. "If a ruler's harshness offends you," he says, "do not in turn be harsh toward your subordinates."

This brief but richly layered narrative operates on five interrelated levels of meaning, each expanding Saʿdī's moral discourse from the individual to the social, and from ethical conduct to the critique of power.

1. Appearance and Essence: The Epistemology of Misjudgment

Saʿdī begins by emphasizing Luqmān's outward features "I heard that Luqmān was black of complexion, neither corpulent, nor of delicate frame," and immediately stages the elite's moral error, "Someone thought him his very slave, considered him lowly, and set him to the task of clay."

The judgment of character by physical form becomes a critique of surface epistemology, the failure of the unwise to perceive substance beneath material appearance. Saʿdī thus transforms racial and social prejudice into a moral test of perception, highlighting the necessity of wisdom and of a collective migration beyond surface epistemology toward a society grounded in perception, justice, equality and mercy.

2. Suffering as Insight: Transforming Oppression into Understanding

Luqmān's endurance under injustice is described with patience and dignity "He endured the injustice, bore the tyranny and wrath, within a year, a dwelling to his benefit he built.". The repetition of *besākht* ("built / endured") fuses the physical act of construction with the inner building of patience (*ṣabr*). Saʿdī recasts suffering as a pedagogy of the spirit, each hardship becomes a site of the generation of wisdom. Patience in the face of hardship and adversity, which is the condition of humanity in this life as stated by the Qur'an "indeed we have created humanity in travail" (Qur'an, 90:4), is simultaneously the fruit of wisdom and its generative ground.

3. Wisdom in Action: Forgiveness as Enacted Ḥikma

When the elite repents, Luqmān replies, "Yet I forgive you, O noble man, for your gain brought me no loss; you built your chamber, and I gained wisdom and understanding".

This exchange elevates forgiveness from sentiment to *praxis*. Luqmān's *ḥikma* is not speculative but embodied in ethical action.

Luqmān's remark, "For your profit has not brought us loss", introduces a profound ethical symmetry. The oppressor's worldly gain paradoxically enables the oppressed's existential development through the practice of patience and the development of insight and wisdom. Saʿdī frames this injustice as a moment of mutual moral instruction; the elite learns humility, and Luqman through introspection gains a deep understanding of the inherent power disbalance in hierarchical socio-economic structures and the importance of placing compassion and justice as the foundations of power structures.

This reflects the Qurʾanic principle, *"Do good as God has done good to you, and do not seek corruption on the earth"* (Qur 28:77). Ethical understanding and insights are thus presented as dialogical.

4. Critique of Hierarchical Power: Discursive Inversion of Authority

The moral culmination occurs in the didactic closure, "Whosoever has not borne the tyranny of the great, Will find his heart unburned by the lowly oppressed." The dialogical nature of ethical understanding is highlighter here. Saʿdī performs a discursive inversion, the once-oppressed becomes the moral legislator, through introspection. Ethical legitimacy and righteous conduct are re-rooted in humility and compassion, not social rank and economic ability. Empathy and walking in the other's shoe become essential tools that result in the understanding of the other and identifying the inherent flaws of hierarchical power structures.

This inversion parallels Foucault's notion of power reversal, the ethical subject resists domination through self-discipline and moral authority rather than overt rebellion, and utilises the experience of being the subject of tyranny to give birth to a practical ethical discourse that transforms socio-economic and power structures on the basis of wisdom, justice and compassion.

5. From Individual Virtue to Social Justice: The Expansion of Ḥikma into Public Ethics

Finally, Luqmān's counsel transcends the personal sphere to articulate a proto-political ethic, The degree of the permeation of justice in society depends on the humane exercise of authority, grounded in wisdom, justice, and compassion, at every level.

Saʿdī's closing injunction, "Do not deal harshly with your subordinates." generalises the lesson into a universal code of just and compassionate governance, harmonizing Qurʾanic injunctions such as *"... Truly God loves not one who is a vainglorious boaster"* (Qur'an 4:36).
In Saʿdī's ethical discourse, the governance of the self and the governance of others are mutually reflective: humility and compassion become the grammar of justice.

Through these five interwoven levels, Saʿdī constructs a moral allegory of power and resistance. The tale of Luqmān portrays the unique power *ḥikma* which in this tale transforms servitude into sovereignty of the spirit, revealing that true mastery lies in self-restraint, empathy, introspection and wisdom enacted through action. Luqmān as the accidental subject of the tyranny inherent in socio-economic power structures discovers the necessity of reforming these structures to place wisdom, justice and compassion as their foundation.

Discourse Analysis

1. The transformation of the "oppressed slave" into a "moral teacher" enacts a discursive subversion of hierarchical power structures.

2. The concluding verses, *"If the ruler's harshness offends you, be not harsh to those beneath you"* presents a counter-discourse to hierarchical power structures. It functions as a delegitimization of political despotism within the socio-political context of the thirteenth century (7th century AH).

3. The inversion of the master–servant relationship challenges the ideological foundations of hierarchy, embodying a reversal of power that gives rise to ethical resistance.

4. Qurʾanic resonance: "And lower your wing to the believers who follow you" (*Qurʾan*, 26:215), and "… Truly God loves not one who is a vainglorious boaster" (*Qurʾan*, 4:36).

4. Avoiding a Life of Error: The Discourse of Self-Care

At the conclusion of The Story of the Old Man and His Regret for the Days of Youth in Book IX, of the *Būstān* Saʿdī invokes Luqmān in the last three verses as a figure of wisdom and moral authority.

1	One night in youth and pure blessings, we youth together sat a while.	شبی در جوانی و طیب نعم جوانان نشستیم چندی بهم
2	Like nightingales singing, fresh-faced as roses, our playfulness casting clamour into the street.	چو بلبل، سرایان چو گل تازه روی ز شوخی در افکنده غلغل به کوی
3	An elder who had seen the world, apart from us, by the turning of the cosmos, the night of his hair had become day.	جهاندیده پیری ز ما بر کنار ز دور فلک لیل مویش نهار
4	His mouth, like a hazelnut, was closed to speech, not like us, whose lips were open in smiles like pistachios.	چو فندق دهان از سخن بسته بود نه چون ما لب از خنده چون پسته بود
5	A youth approached, saying: "Old man, why sit in pain in the corner of regret?"	جوانی فرا رفت کای پیرمرد چه در کنج حسرت نشینی به درد؟
6	Lift your head, for a while, from sorrow's collar,	یکی سر برآر از گریبان غم

	with tranquil heart, come sway with the youth.	به آرام دل با جوانان بچم
7	He raised his aged head from seclusion.	برآورد سر سالخورد از نهفت
	Behold his answer—how sage-like he spoke.	جوابش نگر تا چه پیرانه گفت
8	“When the eastern breeze blows upon the rose-garden,	چو باد صبا بر گلستان وزد
	swaying befits the youthful tree.	چمیدن درخت جوان را سزد
9	Wheat sways while young and green,	چمد تا جوان است و سرسبز خوید
	but is broken once it becomes yellow.	شکسته شود چون به زردی رسید
10	In spring, when the musk willow puts forth its fragrance,	بهاران که بید آورد بید مشک
	the thick tree sheds its dry leaves.	بریزد درخت گشن برگ خشک
11	It befits me not to sway with the youth,	نزیبد مرا با جوانان چمید
	for on my face the dawn of age has breathed.	که بر عارضم صبح پیری دمید
12	The playful falcon bound within me,	به قید اندرم جره بازی که بود
	still ever seeks to steal control.	دمادم سر رشته خواهد ربود
13	It is your turn to sit at this banquet,	شما راست نوبت بر این خوان نشست
	for we have washed our hands of pampered luxury.	که ما از تنعم بشستیم دست
14	When the dust of age has settled on your head,	چو بر سر نشست از بزرگی غبار
	look not again to the joys of youth.	دگر چشم عیش جوانی مدار

15	Snow has fallen upon my raven feathers; I may not, like the nightingale, behold the garden.	مرا برف باریده بر پر زاغ نشاید چو بلبل تماشای باغ
16	The beauteous peacock displays itself; what would you want of a falcon, its wings plucked?	کند جلوه طاووس صاحب جمال چه می‌خواهی از باز برکنده بال؟
17	My grain was lean in the harvest; for you, the new green now breathes forth.	مرا غله تنگ اندر آمد درو شما را کنون می‌دمد سبزه نو
18	The freshness of our rose-garden has passed; who binds a bouquet when the flowers have withered?	گلستان ما را طراوت گذشت که گل دسته بندد چو پژمرده گشت؟
19	My leaning, O father's soul, is on the staff; to lean on life further would be an error.	مرا تکیه جان پدر بر عصاست دگر تکیه بر زندگانی خطاست
20	Surely, the young naturally spring to their feet, while the aged go forth with their support in hand.	مسلم جوان راست بر پای جست که پیران برند استعانت به دست
21	Behold the red rose of my face, pure gold; it has sunk, as the sun turned yellow.	گل سرخ رویم نگر زر ناب فرو رفت، چون زرد شد آفتاب
22	When an unformed child cooks up a fancy, it is not so shameful as in an elder unripe.	هوس پختن از کودک ناتمام چنان زشت نبود که از پیر خام
23	I, like children, must weep,	مرا می‌بباید چو طفلان گریست

	for shame of sins — not live childishly.”	ز شرم گناهان، نه طفلانه زیست
24	Luqmān spoke well — for not to live,	نکو گفت لقمان که نازیستن
	is better than long years lived in error.	به از سالها بر خطا زیستن
25	To close the cottage door from dawn,	هم از بامدادان در کلبه بست
	is better than forfeiting profit and capital.	به از سود و سرمایه دادن ز دست
26	Before the youth brings his blackness into light,	جوان تا رساند سیاهی به نور
	the desolate old man takes his whiteness to the grave.	برد پیر مسکین سپیدی به گور

Saʿdī, *Būstān* Book IX, On Repentance, Story 2, The Story of the Old Man and His Regret for the Days of Youth.

Saʿdī’s invocation of Luqmān at the conclusion of this tale exemplifies the Islamic disciplines of *adab* (right comportment, ethical cultivation and proper conduct) and *muḥāsaba* (self-reckoning), integral practices of self-regulation within the Islamic spiritual tradition. In postmodern theoretical terms, this corresponds to what Michel Foucault (1988) describes as a *technology of the self*, a discursive practice through which individuals learn to govern their conduct, desires, and temporality in accordance with ethical and spiritual norms. Within this framework, Saʿdī constructs a moral economy in which youth, time, and the body function as forms of divine capital that must be properly invested. The recurring metaphors of profit and loss, harvest and grain, situate moral behaviour within an economic logic of self-discipline, to “avoid living in error” is not only to preserve temporal life but to reach spiritual perfection and prepare bountiful harvest for the afterlife. The Qur’an states “Whosoever desires the harvest of the Hereafter, We shall increase for him his harvest. And whosoever desires the harvest of this world, We shall give him some thereof, but he will have no share in the Hereafter.” (Qur’an, 42:20). This Qur’anic verse

illuminates why "not living" is better than "years living in error", for by not living, one does not pursue the transient "harvest of this world," whereas living in error amasses only the "firewood of Hell," as the Qurʾan warns, *"His wealth shall not avail him, nor what he earned. He shall enter a blazing fire, and his wife—the carrier of firewood"* (Qur'an, 111:2–4).

Saʿdī stages the moral dialectic of youth and wisdom through the texture of his imagery. The elder's voice begins with the natural metaphor, "When the eastern breeze blows upon the rose-garden, swaying befits the youthful tree." The verse's rhythm itself enacts the *chamīdan* ("swaying") that it describes, its long vowels imitating motion and vitality. Yet this vitality is immediately curtailed, "But is broken once it becomes yellow." Here, the lush phonetic repetition of *sh* and *z* mimics decay by age. The contrast between movement and fracture, freshness and withering, mirrors Saʿdī's moral physics of time, youth as the time of potential and planting the seeds for a bountiful harvest, old age as the time of harvest and the decline of potential and opportunity for wisdom and perfection under divine law. The old man's lesson thus emerges not only from his words but from the very *form* of Saʿdī's verse, where rhythm and allegory and imagery become ethical instruction and offer a shift of perception on time and its passage.

This moral economy echoes the Qurʾanic lexicon of commerce and accountability. Terms such as *ribh* (profit) and *khasāra* (loss), and especially the warning of *Sūrat al-ʿAṣr*, *"*Indeed, humankind is in loss*"* (Qur'an, 103:2), establish the temporal expanse of human life as a capital to be invested in view of divine judgment. The Qur'an concludes that all human life is at loss, "save those who believe, perform righteous deeds, exhort one another to truth, and exhort one another to patience" (Qur'an, 103:3). Saʿdī's Persian diction (*sūd*, *zarar*, *ghalle*) translates this sacred accounting into poetic economy. His verse symbolises what Foucault later calls "the care of the self," where ethical vigilance becomes the means by which the believer protects and increases his moral capital before God.

At the same time, Saʿdī integrates this ethical discourse into a Sufi epistemology of selfhood. When the old man laments, *"My grain was lean in the harvest,"* the economic metaphor acquires a mystical dimension, the life's yield, his belief (īmān) and righteous deeds, and his degree of wisdom and spiritual perfection, which all guard against existing in a state of loss, is insufficient for a tranquil union with the Divine. However, all is not lost, while the old man had a lean harvest, he gives glad tidings to the youth, "for you, the new green now breathes forth". Here Saʿdī emphasises the interdependence of perception and the art of living, how one sees the world—its origin, values, purposes, and ends—determines how one lives it.

Through this interplay of ethical, economic, and mystical imagery, Saʿdī articulates a disciplinary discourse of transcendental self-care. His moral pedagogy employs the Islamic practices of muḥāsaba (self-reckoning) and *riyāḍat al-nafs* (discipline of the soul), continuous introspection, repentance, and the cultivation of virtue.

The invocation of Luqmān at the poems closing marks the culmination of this process. In Qurʾan 31:12–19, Luqmān instructs his son in humility, gratitude, and moral vigilance, qualities mirrored in the elder's reflective wisdom. By attributing his final maxim to Luqmān, *"*for not to live, is better than long years lived in error,*"* Saʿdī transforms personal reflection into universal moral authority. The elder's private lament becomes, through Luqmān's voice, a public injunction, a call to introspection, repentance, and ethical consciousness and the recognition of spiritual and ethical perfection as the harvest that should be sought in this transient life.

The poem's closing aphorism thus crystallizes Saʿdī's broader poetics of wisdom; worldly experience converted into moral exemplum, sanctioned by the voice of Divine *ḥikma*. Luqmān functions as the didactic nexus where Qurʾanic wisdom, Sufi self-discipline, and self-formation converge. To live without error, is to perceive reality and live deliberately, under the gaze of both divine and internalized moral authority, transforming the management of

one's time, body, and desire into the highest form of transcendental self-care.

Discourse Analysis

1. The opposition between "blackness (youth / dark hair in youth)" and "whiteness (old age / white hair in old age)" constructs a binary discursive contrast through which time is moralized and embodied.
2. The reference to *Sūrat al-ʿAṣr*, "Indeed, humankind is in loss" (Qur'an, 103:2) invokes a sacred authority that legitimizes an ideology of body/spirit/time management, transforming a philosophical reminder of human transience into a regulatory discourse of ethical conduct.
3. The narrative produces a disciplinary discourse of transcendental self-care in which time and youth are represented as a form of moral and corporeal capital that must be prudently managed, invested, and preserved. The self is called to govern its desires and regulate its practices not through external coercion but through internalized moral vigilance, and a perceptual reorientation towards the eternal. This transformation of perception results in a reinterpretation of the semiotics of life, its nature, purpose and telos. Within this framework, practical wisdom arises from the dynamic synthesis of multiple sources: lived experience, primordial nature (*fiṭrah*), the sacred, and theoretical wisdom. The sacred and the theoretical, in dialogue with the interpretation of life's signs, ground a mode of wisdom that is both contemplative and lived, forming the basis of this transcendental self-care. Self-discipline, in this framework, constitutes a return to the primordial nature (*fiṭrah*) and results in an ontological optimism rooted in alignment with the Divine order.
4. Within this framework, time and the body become sites of ethical labour and transcendental self-care. The discourse frames the journey of spiritual perfection and bodily management as intertwined forms of governance.

5. The text constructs a subject who is a self-regulating moral agent, internalizing divine authority through the practice of self-surveillance (*murāqabah* in Islamic spirituality), self-reform, and the management of capital, conceived in terms of both time and temporality. This internalisation of divine authority is not alienating but redemptive, as it aligns the self with the Divine will, an orientation captured in the Qurʾanic declaration, "Say 'Truly my prayer and my sacrifice, my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the worlds'" (Qur'an, 6:162).

5. The Faithlessness of the World: The Discourse of Death-Awareness

In his *Majālis-i Panjgāna* (*Five Sermons*), Saʿdī recounts another anecdote about Luqmān, which foregrounds both the ephemerality of worldly life and the rational detachment characteristic of divine wisdom. Saʿdī writes:

No human being ever lived as long as Luqmān the Wise; his lifespan was three thousand years. When his life came to its end and the Angel of Death arrived, he found him sitting among the reeds, weaving a basket. The Angel of Death said, "O Luqmān, you have woven out three thousand years of life—why did you never build yourself a house?"
Luqmān replied, "O ʿAzrāʾīl, the fool is he who, while one such as you is ever in pursuit of him, still concerns himself with building a house."

> *Verily, this world is but a vanishing shadow;*
> *or like a guest who lodges for a night, then departs;*
> *or like a dream that a sleeper has seen;*
> *and when the night is gone, it is no more.*
> (*Saʿdī, Majālis-i Panjgāna*: no. 4 – *Fourth Sermon*)

Luqmān's dialogue with the Angel of Death portrays the paradox of temporal attachment, even a life of three thousand years does not

justify investment in what is transient and must inevitably be abandoned. Luqmān's ironic retort, *"The fool is he who, while one such as you pursues him, builds a house,"* expresses a profound awareness of mortality that transforms wisdom into ascetic insight. His words echo the Qurʾanic admonition: *"Every soul shall taste death, and you will indeed be paid your reward in full on the Day of Resurrection. And whosoever is distanced from the Fire and made to enter the Garden has certainly triumphed. And the life of this world is naught but the enjoyment of delusion."* (Qur'an, 3:185) and *"Wheresoever you may be, death will overtake you, though you should be in towers raised high…"* (Qur'an, 4:78).

The closing Arabic verses *"Verily, this world is but a vanishing shadow…"* reinforce the Qurʾanic portrayal of the world as a fleeting illusion: *"The life of this world is naught but play and diversion"* (Qur'an, 6:32). In Saʿdī's retelling, Luqmān's renunciation of house-building is a critique of materialism. The materially bound mind, ever so more dominant in our age, understands the pursuit of happiness as the pursuit of material gain, comfort and fame, an understanding that Luqmān declares as foolish. Rather as we saw in the last section, the pursuit of happiness is detachment from the material which by its very nature is transient. It is using the capital of time to attain wisdom and pursue spiritual perfection and union with the Divine, for as the Qur'an states "… All things perish, save His Face. His is the Judgement and to Him you shall all be brought back." (Qur'an, 26:88)

The dialogue between Luqmān and ʿAzrāʾīl thus constructs a discourse of death-awareness and resistance to materialism and worldly accumulation. The phrase *"The fool is he who, while one such as you pursues him…"* operates as a moral imperative against attachment to the material world. Saʿdī is referring to the Sufi concept of *zuhd* (renunciation), countering mercantile values with a spiritual economy grounded in transience, humility, and remembrance of death.

Saʿdī's anecdote on Luqmān in this sermon closely parallels Imam ʿAlī's Sermon 230 in the *Nahj al-Balāgha*:

> …For indeed, death is the destroyer of your pleasures, and the clouding of your desires,
> and the separator of your travelling companions. It is a visitor not beloved,
> an adversary not overcome, and an attacker not pursued…

So, upon you is diligence and striving, and readiness and preparation, and taking provisions in the abode of provision. And let not the worldly life deceive you as it deceived those before you, the nations that have passed, and the generations that are gone, those who milked its sweet yield, and enjoyed its deceptive favour, and exhausted its abundance, and wore out its freshness. Their dwellings became graves, and their wealth became inheritance. They neither recognize those who come to them, nor care for those who weep over them, nor answer those who call upon them. So, beware of the world, for it is treacherous, deluding, and deceitful — giving yet withholding, adorning yet stripping away. Its ease does not endure, its hardship does not cease, and its affliction does not rest.

On the Description of the Ascetics (al-Zuhhād)

They were a people among the people of the world, yet not of it. They were in it as those who do not belong to it. They acted within it with insight, and hastened within it to avoid that which they feared. Their bodies turned about in the midst of the people of the Hereafter. They observed the people of the world magnifying the death of their bodies, and they held greater awe for the death of the hearts of the living among them.

(Imam ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib*, Nahj al-Balāgha*: Sermon 230)

Both sermons deploy a rhetoric of inversion, in which worldly beauty becomes deception, comfort becomes danger, and material life itself a prelude to loss. Each text employs imagery of destruction and reversal, the house that becomes a grave, the gathering that disperses, the body that perishes, to reconfigure human aspiration around the axis of mortality and to expose the transience of material existence. In Saʿdī's tale, Luqmān refuses to build a house because he recognizes that every house ends in ruin; in Imam ʿAlī's sermon, the dwelling itself becomes a metaphor for the world's betrayal: *"Then their dwellings became graves, and their wealth became inheritance."*

The world, in both texts, is simultaneously alluring and treacherous, and wisdom (*ḥikma*) consists in perceiving its impermanence. The pursuit of happiness defined within the limits of material life, whose "ease does not endure, hardship does not come to an end, and affliction does not come to rest," is therefore futile. Both Luqmān and Imam ʿAlī construct death not as annihilation but as epistemological revelation when death-awareness is practiced, the unveiling of truth that worldly distraction conceals. The ascetics are described by Imam ʿAlī as being in a state of not belonging to the world and possessing death awareness. Their insight, grounded in *ḥikma* and exemplified by Luqmān in Saʿdī's tale, reveals that death pertains only to the form (*ṣūra*), i.e. the body, not to the human essence, which is the spirit. The body, as accidental and contingent matter, perishes; the spirit, which is immaterial, endures. As such, it is the "death of the heart" of the temporally attached that is the great tragedy. Hence, the admonition common to both is to prepare provisions for the Hereafter, to view life as transient hospitality, and to orient the self toward what endures.

Luqmān's constant remembrance of death, and the grounding of worldly life in awareness of its impermanence and of the divine

origin to which humanity returns, is portrayed as essential to salvation. In his composure, he embodies the Qurʾanic ideal of the soul at peace: *"O thou soul at peace! Return unto thy Lord, content, contenting."* (Qur'an, 89:27–28). Through this tale, Saʿdī reminds his audience that true wisdom lies not in building for the world, but in building for union with the Divine.

Discourse Analysis

1. The dialogue between Luqmān and ʿAzrāʾīl constructs a discourse of resistance to materiality.

2. The phrase *"The fool is he who, while one such as you pursues him…"* functions as an ironic speech act of moral command directed against worldliness.

3. Discursive function: the story promotes the concept of Sufi renunciation (*zuhd*) in opposition to the commerce-driven social discourse.

6. Almsgiving as a Deterrent to Injustice and a Means of Distributive Justice

In the *Gulistān*, Saʿdī recounts another anecdote about Luqmān, which underscores the importance of almsgiving and aid to those in need as a means of warding off calamities:

A caravan was plundered in the land of Greece, and they carried off an immeasurable wealth.

The merchants wept and lamented and invoked God and the Prophet as intercessors, to no avail.

When the dark-souled thief is triumphant,
Why should he care for the weeping of the caravan?
Luqmān the Wise was among that caravan.
One of the travellers said to him: "Unless you can offer them counsel and admonition them that they might refrain from taking a portion of our wealth? It is a pity that so much bounty should be wasted."
[Luqmān] replied: "It is a pity to speak a word of wisdom to them.
Iron that is eaten by termite
Cannot have its rust removed by polishing.
What profit is there in preaching to a blackened heart?
The iron nail will not penetrate the stone.
Surely, the fault lies on our side.
In the days of well-being, attend the distressed;
For healing the heart of the destitute averts calamity.
When a supplicant pleads with you in distress,
Give, Else the oppressor will seize it by force."
(Saʿdī, *Gulistān*, Book II: *On the Morals of Dervishes*, Tale 19)

In this story, a caravan is attacked by robbers, and the merchants' despair in tears. Among them is Luqmān the Wise. When asked to admonish the thieves, he replies that moral counsel to hearts darkened by corruption is futile, like iron consumed by termites that cannot be restored by polishing, or a nail that cannot be driven into stone. This response reflects Luqmān's realism regarding the limits of moral reform in a morally decayed society; reform requires both receptivity and willingness to change. His silence thus becomes a counter-discursive act, exposing the dysfunction of the prevailing moral economy.

More crucial, however, is Luqmān's subsequent reflection: *"Surely, the fault lies on our side."* This utterance performs a discursive inversion of responsibility, reframing moral failure as collective rather than external. He then provides the true remedy, almsgiving. Luqmān asserts that the root of this calamity lies in the caravan's neglect of charity and assistance to the poor during times of ease. Helping the destitute, he explains, serves as a shield against

misfortune. He thus articulates a moral causality, when voluntary charity (*infaq*) is withheld, involuntary loss and social violence follow. If one refuses to give to the supplicant in distress (*sāʾil*), the oppressor (*ṣitamgar*) will take it by force.

At its surface, the tale teaches the link between charity and social security, and the role of almsgiving (*ṣadaqa*) in averting calamity. At a deeper level, it functions as a critique of unjust socio-economic structures, parallel to the earlier tale of Luqmān and the elite discussed in Section 3. While that episode engages primarily with the ethics of power, this parable addresses economic imbalance and the moral necessity of voluntary charity as a foundation for social renewal. Saʿdī suggests that a society that tolerates destitution and neglects the poor becomes morally corroded, a society subject to violence.

The anecdote transforms a scene of material loss into a meditation on economic ethics. Saʿdī's Luqmān presents charity not merely as a personal virtue but as a form of social equilibrium, wherein generosity functions as a redistributive mechanism sustaining economic balance, communal security, and divine favour, an ethic rooted in the Qurʾanic principle:

"That which you give in usury that it might increase through other people's wealth does not increase with God. But that which you give in alms, desiring the Face of God—it is they who receive a manifold increase." (Qur'an 30:39)

Saʿdī's parable thus becomes a socio-economic critique, constructing a discourse of distributive justice that binds ethical conduct to the preservation of social order and divine protection. It envisions an alternative economy of power, where generosity rather than domination sustains communal stability. The parable thereby operates as a counter-discourse to economic rationality, displacing the logic of insatiable accumulation with an ethics of redistribution that grounds both material and spiritual security in communal welfare.

Discourse Analysis

1. The metaphor of "the termite and the iron" functions as an allegory for the impotence of reformist discourse within systems corroded by moral decay, a dynamic that, as van Dijk (1993, p. 112) notes, exposes the persistent gap between moral ideals of the elite and social realities.

2. *"Surely, the fault lies on our side"* enacts a collective assumption of responsibility in the production of social injustice.

3. The opposition between *voluntary giving* and *forcible plunder* warns against the inevitable social violence that follows economic injustice.

4. Almsgiving (*ṣadaqa*) emerges as a disciplinary practice that maintains both spiritual equilibrium and socio-economic order, aligning divine justice with ethical self-regulation.

Conclusion

With remarkable intellectual finesse, Saʿdī of Shiraz presents Luqmān the Wise as an exemplar of the perfect human and the embodiment of wisdom in his works. From learning refinement through the discourtesy of the ill-mannered and acquiring insight from the blind, to his patience in the face of oppression and indifference to the deceit of the world, and his emphasis on humility toward subordinates and almsgiving as a means of averting misfortune, all these facets reveal the multi-dimensional character of Luqmān as envisioned by Saʿdī.

These tales and sayings attributed to Luqmān not only enrich Persian literary heritage but also offer timeless ethical, spiritual, and social instruction. By drawing on this Qurʾanic and historical figure, Saʿdī

guides his readers toward practical wisdom (*ḥikma ʿamaliyya*), moral vigilance, and an awareness of the highest human virtues.

Luqmān as Saʿdī's Discursive Instrument

1. Representation of Luqmān

Saʿdī constructs Luqmān as an ideological subject in order to:

a) promote a discourse of practical ethics (as opposed to speculative philosophy);

b) critique the dominant discourse of political power;

c) critique socio-economic injustice.

d) establish a discursive equilibrium between Sharīʿa (religious law) and ʿirfān (mystical insight).

2. Linguistic Strategies

a) Integration of Qurʾanic and folkloric registers to render moral instruction both authoritative and accessible;

b) Use of semantic contrast—for instance, *"dark-skinned yet wise"*—to challenge and subvert social stereotypes.

3. Social Function

Transformation of Luqmān's wisdom into an instrument of social order and ethical restoration in an age of political upheaval (the Mongol invasions).

In Saʿdī's discourse, Luqmān is not merely a historical figure but a living archetype, an embodiment of ethical resistance to tyranny and materialism.

This discourse analysis of Saʿdī's tales reveals the latent structures of power, ideology, and resistance within his moral narratives, offering a new understanding of his works. By transforming Luqmān into an ideological subject (Fairclough, 2003), Saʿdī constructs a counter-discourse of resistance against oppressive systems. These narratives not only reproduce religious values through Qurʾanic intertextuality, but also construct a counter-discourse that contests the ideological authority of the ruling power.

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