

The Poetry of Afghanistan

OVERVIEW

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Unlike other art forms, poetry is cherished by almost every group in Afghan society, and is considered a great way to express oneself. Poetry is commonly read and recited by men, women, modern-day progressives, as well as conservative Muslims. Poetry in Afghanistan, in both Persian (Dari) and Pashto, dates back thousands of years.

The most famous Persian poet who was born in what is today called Afghanistan is the 13th century Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi Balkhi. His works are widely read, not just in the Persian speaking countries of Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Iran, but in the West as well. Balkhi's poetry is very spiritual in nature. The themes of his poetry resonate with all sorts of people. His poems have been translated into many languages, including English, Spanish, French, Spanish, Italian, and even Russian.

The most famous Pashto poet is considered to be Khushal Khan Khattak. Khattak, who is referred to as the national poet of Afghanistan, was a warrior poet that lived in the 17th century. He mostly wrote about unity, honor, war, love, and everyday life.

Poetry is not the just the domain of men in Afghanistan. The nation's most famous female poet is Rabia Balkhi, a woman who lived in the 10th century, and wrote powerful Persian poems about love. Rabia Balkhi was imprisoned and killed by her brother for falling in love with a slave. It is commonly believed that she wrote her last poem on the wall of the room she was imprisoned in, using her own blood.

Many Pashtun women in Afghanistan use *landai*, a type of oral poetry, originating thousands of years ago, to express love and grief. *Landai* is a type of poem (usually anonymous) that is composed of two lines and typically has 22 syllables. One of the most famous *landai* poems came from Malalai, an Afghan heroine who played a major role in the Battle of Maiwand during the second Anglo-Afghan war. During the battle, when the tide turned against the Afghan fighters and their morale dropped, Malalai cried out:

*Young love if you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand;
By God someone is saving you as a token of shame;*

The common belief is that this *landai* motivated the Afghan fighters to fight harder, ultimately defeating the British invaders.

As a form of entertainment, Afghans participate in what is referred to as *Sher Jangi*, which translates to "poetry fighting" or "poem battle". One person composes a verse, and his or her opponent must respond by composing a coherent second verse that begins with the last letter of the first verse. The game goes back and forth until one of them fails to come up with a coherent response.

Khushal Khan Khattak

*Life's no life when honor's left;
Man's a man when honor's kept.*

*Nation's honor and nation's fame;
On life they have a prior claim.*

*With thoughts of these I do remain;
Unvexed with cares of loss or gain.*

*The knowing, the perceptive man
is he who knows about himself,*

*for in self-knowledge and insight
lies knowledge of the holiest.*

*If in his heart there is no fear,
his deeds are not those of the good,*

*pay no heed to one who's skilled
in quoting the Qur'an by heart.*

Rabia Balkhi

*I am caught in Love's web so deceitful
None of my endeavors turn fruitful.
I knew not when I rode the high-blooded steed
The harder I pulled its reins the less it would heed.
Love is an ocean with such a vast space
No wise man can swim it in any place.
A true lover should be faithful till the end
And face life's reprobated trend.
When you see things hideous, fancy them neat,
Eat poison, but taste sugar sweet.*

Jalaluddin Rumi Balkhi

*Sometimes I forget completely
what companionship is.
Unconscious and insane, I spill sad
energy everywhere. My story
gets told in various ways: a romance,
a dirty joke, a war, a vacancy.*

*Divide up my forgetfulness to any number,
it will go around.
These dark suggestions that I follow,
are they a part of some plan?
Friends, be careful. Don't come near me
out of curiosity, or sympathy.*

Kabul

By Saib-e-Tabrizi

translation by Dr. Josephine Barry Davis

Ah! How beautiful is Kabul encircled by her arid mountains
And Rose, of the trails of thorns she envies
Her gusts of powdered soil, slightly sting my eyes
But I love her, for knowing and loving are born of this same dust

My song exhorts her dazzling tulips 5
And at the beauty of her trees, I blush
How sparkling the water flows from Pul-I-Mastaan!
May Allah protect such beauty from the evil eye of man!

Khizr chose the path to Kabul in order to reach Paradise
For her mountains brought him close to the delights of heaven 10
From the fort with sprawling walls, A Dragon of protection
Each stone is there more precious than the treasure of Shayagan

Every street of Kabul is entralling to the eye
Through the bazaars, caravans of Egypt pass
One could not count the moons that shimmer on her roofs 15
And the thousand splendid suns that hide behind her walls

Her laughter of mornings has the gaiety of flowers
Her nights of darkness, the reflections of lustrous hair
Her melodious nightingales, with passion sing their songs
Ardent tunes, as leaves enflamed, cascading from their throats 20

And I, I sing in the gardens of Jahanara, of Sharbara
And even the trumpets of heaven envy their green pastures.