

Zay Khay Sheen, Aligarh's Purdah-Nashin Poet

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Zay Khay Sheen, or Zahida Khatun Sherwani (1894-1922),¹ was the younger daughter of Nawab Sir Muzammilullah Khan Sherwani, Rais of Bhikampur in the Aligarh district of North India.² Sir Muzammilullah (1865-1938) was an important figure in the Aligarh movement. A follower of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, he was a leading member of the Board of Trustees of Aligarh College, a champion of turning Aligarh College into a University, and politically loyal to the British connection. He was also a skillful poet in Persian, and had a string of alphabetical honors following his title as Khan Bahadur: LLD, KCIE, OBE, etc.³

The Sherwani clan of Aligarh district was distinguished in educational circles and produced a number of important figures, Habibur Rahman Khan Sherwani, Nawab Habib Yar Jung, was an Islamic scholar and an official in Hyderabad. Harun Khan Sherwani was a well-known historian of the Deccan (his wife is the biographer of Z-Kh-Sh). The clan had two main branches, the lineage of Bhikampur and that of Datauli, and practiced cousin marriage to an almost exclusive degree. The family tree presents a bewildering array of interlocking relationships.⁴

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² Secondary sources about her poetry, in Urdu, include: Shan ul Haq Haqqi, "Z-Kh-Sh," in *Nukta-i-Raz* (Karachi: 'Asri Kutub, 1972), pp. 283-307; M. Jamil Ahmad, *Tazkirah-i-Sha'irat-i-Urdu* (Bareilly: Qaumi Kutub Khana, 1944), pp. 407-35; and [Dr.] Fatima Hasan, *Z-Kh-Sh: Hayat o Sha'iri ka Tahqiqi aur Tanqidi Jaeza* (Karachi: Anjuman-i-Taraqqi-i-Urdu Pakistan, 2007).

³ N.K Jain, *Muslims in India: A Biographical Dictionary* (Delhi: Manohar, 1983), Vol. II, pp. 80-81; for Sir Muzammilullah's role at Aligarh, see S.K. Bhatnagar, *History of the MAO College Aligarh* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969), pp. 147-181, 231, 255, 258-59, 266-68, 289, 313-14, 327, 334, 344, 351-52; and Gail Minault and David Lelyveld, "The Campaign for a Muslim University, 1898-1920," *Modern Asian Studies*, 8:2 (April 1974): 145-89.

⁴ Sherwani family tree as an appendix to Sherwani, *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*.

The Sherwanis were a family, therefore, that displayed an intriguing combination of the progressive and the conservative: They were supporters of education, whether Islamic or western, and promoters of education for women, although the women of the family maintained strict purdah and were educated at home. Their loyalist politics were manifested in civic service and membership in reform associations, along with resistance to the growing forces of anti-British activism before and after World War I.⁵ Their marriage patterns kept the family properties intact, while taking a toll on the health of their increasingly inbred offspring.⁶

Z-Kh-Sh was a product of this large and intellectually vibrant family. Her mother died when she was very young. Her father, consequently, had a major role in Zahida's education and that of her siblings: an older sister, Ahmadi,⁷ and a younger brother, Ahmadullah.⁸ Their education began with a Bismillah ceremony at age four, initiating them into learning the Quran with an Aligarh Maulvi, Hafiz Ahmad Ali.⁹ Once they had read the Quran, Sir Muzammilullah wanted his daughters to learn Persian, the mark of a cultured literary education, and he cast about for a capable governess (*mu'allima*), whom he found in Bhopal – recommended by the Begam of Bhopal herself – an Iranian woman, known as Farkhunda Begam Teherani. She was not only a native speaker of Persian, but an accomplished poet who introduced her pupils to the craft of writing, as well as reading, poetry.¹⁰

⁵ See e.g., Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁶ This is a generalization based on references to mental illness and early deaths in *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, and Haqqi, "Z-Kh-Sh."

⁷ Ahmadi's daughter married the son of Harun Khan Sherwani and Anisa Begam (see family tree appended to *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*); Ahmadi suffered from mental illness at the end of her life. Haqqi, "Z-Kh-Sh," p. 301.

⁸ Ahmadullah was the son of Sir Muzammillullah and his second wife; Ahmadullah died young, in 1916. Ahmad, *Tazkirah-i-Sha'irat-i-Urdu*, p. 430.

⁹ *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, p. 23.

¹⁰ *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, pp. 24-25.

What was not known to either the Begam of Bhopal or to Sir Muzammilullah at that time was that Farkhunda was an alias. The governess had changed her name from Rakhshanda Khanum and started a new life in India after she had left Tehran under obscure circumstances. A former concubine of Nasiruddin Shah Qajar, she had apparently fallen afoul of political factionalism at the Qajar court. She nevertheless maintained a correspondence and exchanged poetry with the Shah even in exile, letters discovered among her papers at the time of her death many years later.¹¹ Becoming a governess to a landed family in Aligarh district must have been quite an alteration in her lifestyle, to put it mildly. In the description of the instruction that she offered the Sherwani daughters, there is little hint of her colorful past, though one supposes that she opened their eyes to the classics of Persian poetry and give them glimpses of the world outside Aligarh. During this period of their education, the two sisters began writing poetry both in Persian and Urdu. At about the age of ten, Zahida expressed her ambition to become a well-known poet:

*Aisi banun main sha'irah jaisi koi na ho
Sara jahan nazm meri dekhta rahe.*

May I become like no other poetess
That the whole world may know my verse.¹²

Sir Muzammilullah also wanted his three children to learn Islamic theology and good Urdu expository prose, and he thus engaged the services of Maulvi Muhammad Ya'qub Isra'ili, from the family of the Imam of the Jum'a Mosque of Aligarh and associated with the Ahl-i-Hadith movement.¹³ So Zahida and her sister and brother had both a Persian governess with a romantic and literary background and an Ahl-i-Hadith

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Haqqi, "Z-Kh-Sh," p. 304; *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, p. 33.

¹³ *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, p. 29.

maulvi as a tutor in Islamic thought—all this in the first decade or so of the twentieth century, a time when in Aligarh the movement for founding a girls’ school and women’s normal school and the renewed effort to turn Aligarh College into a Muslim University were occupying public attention and preoccupying their father.¹⁴

During this time, Z-Kh-Sh started writing verses and articles and sent them off to various women’s magazines and other literary periodicals: *Khatun* of Aligarh, *‘Ismat* of Delhi, *Sharif Bibi* of Lahore, and others.¹⁵ She also became the organizer and ring-leader of her generation of Sherwani cousins, starting a “Young Sherwanis’ League” that met periodically (sometimes monthly, but also bi-annually), elected officers (she was the Honorary Secretary), collected dues, and had a formal list of aims and objectives that included starting schools for the children of Bhikampur and Datauli, and donating money to the drive for a boarding house for Aligarh Girl’s School.¹⁶ This organization, with its officers, rules, and fundraising showed that the Sherwani women (sisters and cousins), though maintaining strict purdah, were well aware of the burgeoning number of educational and social *anjumans* [voluntary associations] that were so much a part of public life among North Indian Muslims at the time.¹⁷

During this time too, Z-Kh-Sh became concerned with the fate of Muslims elsewhere, and wrote *nazms* about the Balkan and Tripolitan wars and the Kanpur Mosque incident. Aligarh was a center of an effort to put together a Red Crescent

¹⁴ Gail Minault, “Shaikh Abdullah, Begam Abdullah and *Sharif* Education for Girls at Aligarh,” in Imtiaz Ahmad, ed., *Modernization and Social Change among Muslims in India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1983), pp. 207-36; and G. Minault and D. Lelyveld, “The Campaign for a Muslim University,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 8:2 (April 1974), pp. 145-89. Though a supporter of women’s education, Sir Muzammilullah, like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan before him, opposed sending girls out of the house to school, as witness his careful supervision of his girls’ home education.

¹⁵ For Urdu women’s magazines in this period, see G. Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 105-57.

¹⁶ *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, pp. 42-44.

¹⁷ For various social and educational *anjumans* in this period, see G. Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, pp. 158-214.

Medical Mission to aid Turkey during the Balkan wars of 1911-13, and such Muslim leaders as Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, Dr. Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari, and Hakim Ajmal Khan visited Aligarh College to raise funds both for the university movement and for the support of Turkey. In 1913 also, the Kanpur Mosque incident brought religion and politics together even more explicitly in a direct confrontation between Muslim publicists and the government. Her father opposed this religio-political activity as anti-British and “extremist” and hence detrimental to the cause of the Muslim University Movement, but the younger male Sherwani cousins surely reported to their sisters and female cousins about the excitement that these public meetings were generating in Aligarh. In 1913, Z-Kh-Sh wrote a nazm, “*‘Id ki Khushi men Ghamzadegan-i-Kanpur*” [“Written on the Festival of ‘*Id* in Memory of the Victims of Kanpur”] and sent it to the newspaper *Zamindar* of Lahore, which was edited by the poet and political activist, Zafar Ali Khan.¹⁸ A relative clipped the published version from the paper and mailed it to Zahida. Her father opened the letter and was furious, calling her an “extremist” and ordering her to stop “cursing the government,” as it put him in a very delicate position.¹⁹

Quite aside from the fact that no one who read her published poems knew who “Nuzhat” (her pen-name) was, nor for that matter, who Z-Kh-Sh (another frequent alias) was, Sir Muzammilullah need not have worried. Zahida loved her father very much and delighted in his approval of her literary gift, but was so afraid of his disapproval that she had hidden from him the fact she was publishing her poetry. When her political views veered toward Muslim political causes, and even nationalism, she stepped across a line (even in seclusion) that he could not tolerate. She was so upset by his anger that she

¹⁸ On Zafar Ali Khan’s political poetry, see Gail Minault, “Urdu Political Poetry during the Khilafat Movement,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 8:4 (October 1974): 459-71.

¹⁹ *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, p. 99; also Haqqi, “Z-Kh-Sh,” p. 301.

stopped writing altogether for a while. Eventually, she resumed publishing her poetry without telling him (though he may have suspected it), an act that showed her considerable courage, not to mention her desire for self-expression.

In 1916, her younger brother, Ahmadullah, died suddenly, depriving her—not only of a beloved sibling—but also of her eyes and ears on the current events in Aligarh and the surrounding territory. Thereafter, Z-Kh-Sh’s poetry takes on a darker tone that characterized some of her best known works. An example of her mature work, relatively speaking (it was written in 1918, when she was 24), was “*Sipas Nama -i-Urdu*,” [“In Praise of Urdu”]. It was written to honor the occasion of the inauguration of Osmania University in Hyderabad, the only institution of higher education in India that used Urdu as its medium of instruction. The poem was read out at the inauguration, and apparently no one knew that its author was a woman. An excerpt:²⁰

*Ek la’l hun gudaRi men,
Ek chand hun badli men;
Ek husn hun dehati,
Ek phul hun sehrai.*

*Hai khak men zar madfun.
Hai bahr men durr maknun;
Hai shama’ teh daman,
Hai dasht men shehnai.*

*Zindan men kyun Yusuf;
Pinjare men kyun bulbul?
Ye kaunsi hikmat hai;
Ye kaunsi dana’i?*

I am a ruby wrapped in a rag,
The moon in its darkened phase;
I am a rustic beauty,
A flower in the wilderness.

As is gold buried in the dust.

²⁰ Z-Kh-Sh, *Firdaus-i-Takhayyul*, p. 219; translation by the present author.

Or a pearl lost in the sea;
 A candle under a cover,
 Or in a void, the song of the shahnai.

Why was Yusuf enchained?
 Why the nightingale caged?
 Who gave the order?
 What wisdom so ordained?

In his discussion of Z-Kh-Sh's poetry, Shan ul-Haq Haqqi devotes several pages to an analysis of this work, praising its powerful imagery and the parallels the poet draws between the status of Urdu—marginalized, ignored, hidden from view—and the status of women in her society. He also commends her development of a distinctive voice in “*Sipas-nama*” that, given time, she might have developed more fully.²¹

Dutiful daughter though she was, Z-Kh-Sh was also a lively intellect, interested in the life and politics of her time, and an energetic organizer of her cousins in support of education for poor children and girls. The product of an enlightened (for its time) literary education, and yet hemmed in by family custom and paternal opprobrium, she never left the various Sherwani compounds and never married (the cousin that was intended for her died young and there was no one else within the family of appropriate rank or fortune).²² The lively optimism of her earliest couplet (cited above) was replaced by a gloomy awareness of women's marginal status in her later verse such as “*Sipas-nama*.”

Z-Kh-Sh died young, succumbing to an unspecified fever (possibly tuberculosis) on 2 February 1922, at the age of 27.²³ Sajjad Hyder “Yildiram”²⁴ remarked in a remembrance of Z-Kh-Sh, published in the women's magazine, *Tahzib un-Niswan* of 22

²¹ Haqqi, “Z-Kh-Sh,” pp. 284-85.

²² Haqqi, “Z-Kh-Sh,” p. 299-300, citing *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*.

²³ *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, p. 153

²⁴ Sajjad Hyder, a well-known Urdu litterateur, was also the first Registrar of Aligarh University, and the father of Qurrat ul-‘Ain Hyder, a leading modern Urdu novelist.

February 1924, that: “She was a nightingale, now silenced, who was born in a cage, lived her whole life in that cage, and there drew her last breath.”

*Voh ek ‘andalib thi jo qafas men peda hui, qafas hi men thi,
aur qafas hi men dam thoR dia.*²⁵

A few weeks before she died, Z-Kh-Sh had decided to support the Gandhian *swadeshi* movement, and was in the process of transforming her wardrobe in order to wear *khadi* and thus to demonstrate her adherence to the nationalist cause.²⁶ But unlike her published poetry, this form of support for nationalism would remain hidden behind the four walls of the Sherwani compound.

²⁵ *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, pp. 156-57; also cited in Haqqi, “Z-Kh-Sh,” pp. 303-04.

²⁶ *Hayat-i-Z-Kh-Sh*, p. 153.

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