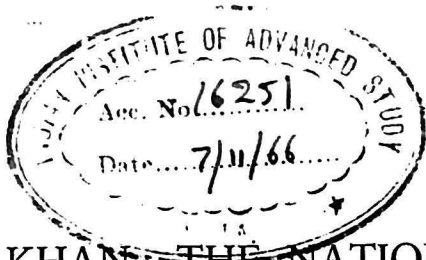


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KHUSHHAL KHAN—THE NATIONAL POET OF THE AFGHANS

TAP

By GEORG MORGENSTIERNE

EDITOR'S NOTE.—The article which follows was originally written in Norwegian by Professor Morgenstierne, the well-known orientalist of Oslo University. The English translation is the work of Mr. Athelstan Carøe, Danish Consul in Liverpool, and carries the full approval of the distinguished author.

Khushhal Khan was an almost exact contemporary of Milton.

PERSIAN, both as a written language and literature, has in Mohammedan times taken so dominating a position in Iran, both through its internal richness and from political and cultural conditions, that only tiny, scattered voices from other Iranian peoples have had a hearing. Strongest probably is the voice of the East-Iranian Afghans. Pashto, the language of the Afghans or Pathans, is very different from Persian—more so, for example, than Norwegian from English. And the Afghans have a highly developed proper pride and sensitivity, which to a great extent is attached to their mother tongue *Pashto*; the same word denotes also their special code of honour and morals. The numerous Afghan tribes have never formed a political unit. Even now a large part of the inhabitants of Afghanistan speak Persian, Turkish or other non-Afghan languages, whilst on the other hand there is a considerable Pashto-speaking Pathan population within the boundaries of Pakistan. Language and common traditions have nevertheless always bound Afghans together, despite all internal quarrels. Contact with India has also given them special characteristics, and it became natural for them to assert their own national individuality by writing in their native language.

The authenticity of Pashto poems recently published, and said to go back to early medieval times, cannot be regarded as proved. A tribal history dating from 1417 has so far been considered to be the oldest work in Pashto. This contains a sort of record of rights ("Domesday Book") for the tribe's occupation of land, so the practical objective is clear, and it was reasonable it should be written in the popular language. Unfortunately, although there is record of its having been written, it appears that the manuscript has disappeared.

The most ancient work, of which a manuscript was recently discovered,* is attributable to the strong religious movement emanating from the arch heretic Bayazid Ansari (died 1585), called "the Saint of Light" by his followers, "the Saint of Darkness" by his embittered orthodox opponent Akhun Darweza, who has compiled a book of fierce polemic against him and other heretics.

* While this English translation was being set up, the MS. has turned up in the University library of Tübingen.

Not before the beginning of the 17th century do we know for certain of a real poem in Pashto. One poet left a "Divan," and others are named. Otherwise the series of Afghan poets opens with the indubitably most notable and important of them all, Khushhal Khan Khatak. What is more, he is one of the most remarkable characters in all Indian and Iranian literature.

Khushhal Khan was born in 1613. (Khushhal means "happy," and he often makes play on the name, sometimes ironically.) He was the son of a chieftain of the Khatak tribe, and for seven generations, his ancestors, he says, had fallen by sword or arrow. During the Afghan expansion in the late Middle Ages the Khataks had settled between the Indus and Peshawar. They occupied a strategic key position because they commanded the Indus crossings and the approach to the Khyber Pass, as important for trade as for the communications between the great Mogul's possessions in India and in what is now Afghanistan. The Khataks could put 30,000 warriors into the field, and were a military factor to reckon with. They were also one of the Afghan tribes who had come in closest touch with the Mogul Empire's mixed Islamic-Hindu culture.

Early on Khushhal got involved in quarrels with neighbouring tribes, and when his father fell in battle in 1640, the Khataks chose him as chieftain. The election was confirmed by his overlord the Great Mogul Shah Jahan, who entrusted to him the guarding of the route from the Indus to Peshawar. He stood generally high in favour with Shah Jahan—the man who built the Taj Mahal in Agra—and received a high title from him. But when the bigoted Aurangzeb gaoled his own father Shah Jahan in 1659 and ascended the throne, he looked on his father's friends with suspicion, and also he wanted to take from the Afghans the relative independence they enjoyed. Khushhal was caught by a ruse of his enemies, sent to Aurangzeb's court and stayed several years in India, partly in prison, partly in enforced exile. Many of his poems give lively pictures of his experiences at this time. When, at last, he returned home, he had lost his royal fiefs and titles, but Aurangzeb did not dare take his title of chief from him. Gradually he came more and more in conflict with the Moguls, and he spent much of his time trying to get the Afghan tribes to fight the Mogul Empire. Not till the 18th century did Ahmad Shah succeed in founding an Afghan state, when both the Mogul Empire and Persia were much weakened. But a century earlier an Afghan patriotism wider than tribal made its appeal, and many tribes joined Khushhal. Aurangzeb, who himself took the field against them, suffered serious defeats. But the gold of the Moguls caused the defection of many Afghans, even of some of the Khataks, and more than one of Khushhal's own sons, headed by Bahram, failed him. (Khushhal himself in one of his poems admits to 30 sons—a later tradition even credits him with 57. Some of them were little good, and he complains of them. But four were poets and the literary tradition persisted in the family for several generations.) At last Khushhal gave up the honour of chieftaincy to his eldest son. He wished to devote himself to his studies and writing. But he never got the peace he hoped for, and he was always quarrelling afresh with Bahram. When he was 77 years old, Bahram sent one of his own sons to kill his

grandfather. But when the old warrior advanced before the army and challenged to single combat, nobody dared to take him on. This happened twice. In the end Khushhal had to flee to the hills to his allies the Afridis, and he died with them aged 78. He was buried in his beloved homeland, but as long as Mogul power lasted his grave was kept secret. "Let not the dust of Mogul horses' hooves sully my tomb," were Khushhal's last words.

So ended a troubled and active life, full of great expectations and deep disappointments. We must not picture Khushhal only as a wild tribal chief and warrior. Even if as a boy, according to himself, he spent one hour at school and twenty hunting, we see clearly from his writings that he was, if not a learned man, at least all round well taught, with good knowledge of the learning and art of his time. The educational programme he himself cites includes booklearning, handwriting, poetry, bow-shooting, swimming, riding and hunting, family life, bringing up of children, teaching servants, housekeeping, farming, trade, genealogy, music, chess and painting.

The court of the Great Moguls, where he spent much of his time voluntarily and involuntarily, was one of the age's great centres of culture, where at least in Shah Jahan's time Mohammedans, Hindus, Christians and others met. Khushhal may well have met the learned French doctor Bernier who stayed there for a long time. Anyhow, the wide range of his comprehensive interests are due not only to his natural talents, but also to the circles he came to know in Delhi, Agra and Lahore. The nearest parallel we can draw in Europe is of a contemporary chieftain from a wild Highland clan who learnt "artes et mores" at the courts of Paris and Edinburgh.

Khushhal's all round abilities and capacity for work in difficult surroundings are clear from his extensive production. It is unlikely he wrote 350 works, as his descendants claim, but we know he wrote manuals on statecraft and war, on medicine, divination and falconry. Housebuilding, bringing up infants, and not least erotica, occupied him as well as theology and ethics. He wrote an autobiography (of which we have fragments), a description of his visit to the mountain valley of Swat, and many other treatises which have been lost. He also invented a sort of shorthand for Pashto, and it is possible that he improved the alphabet. Several of these works have been traced by a learned Pakistani lady of Afghan descent, Dr. Khadijah Ferozuddin, who has written a thesis for the University of Lahore on Khushhal. It contains a good deal of new and interesting information on Khushhal and his works.

Khushhal's chief work is his collection of poems, his Divan, which has been published several times. On the Divan rests Khushhal's reputation, both among his countrymen and among the handful of Europeans who know anything of him. The contents cover all the subjects which occupied Khushhal at one time or other during his life. He puts forward his thoughts and most intimate opinions about every possible question and experience. All his changes of mood, all human frailties are exposed. He sings of the sublime and the all too human, of asceticism and indulgence, of religious devotion, national hopes, ambitions and disappointments, of

erotic entanglements and everyday's small observations, joys and sorrows. All too often he can flop into the dull and commonplace; sometimes he shows the peasant wisdom of a Hesiod. But always the personal element breaks through. His brain throbbed with ideas all through his life, and whatever he writes bears the mark of what he has seen and experienced. We seem to hear himself speaking. It is this live and rich picture we get of his own vital, virile and passionate personality which first captivates the reader and makes his *Divan* a human document close to life, the like of which is not often found in Oriental literature. Generally speaking there is something impersonal about even the greatest Eastern poets. We usually know little of their intimate lives, and it is very rarely possible to follow their development through their poetry. Khushhal's development, year by year, it is possible to follow, so rich are his works in historical and autobiographical data. It is no disparagement to add that it would need a great philological effort to separate what is certainly due to his own genius from what might then have been regarded as traditional common-places, although expressed in a personal manner. To do that one would have to possess a deep knowledge of the literary environment of the Mogul court.

Khushhal *had to write* :

“No, I am not happy (khushhal) with the effort of writing poetry,
But God has laid it like a yoke on my neck to sing.
And never am I pleased myself with expression or thought,
But suddenly it bursts forth in words, like showers in the rainy
season.

There is no worse labour for man than to write verse,
Would that God would free every honest man from such a plague!”

And :

“I am not always pleased at my own verse, yet what can I do?
My heart drives me against my will, at times I am impelled to it.
For twenty years the cauldron of my poetry has been seething,
Not till now it is fit for use, now that my life has passed sixty years.”

A real Afghan is he in his strong proper pride and self assertion. It is perhaps characteristic that he was never tempted to try his hand at impersonal subjects like the well-known Iranian legends, which so many later Persian and Afghan poets again and again rang the changes on. And when he plays on mystic-religious strings, it never occurs to him, as so often happens with Persian sufi-poets, to wish himself freed from the bonds of Self. His own Self, with its experiences and thoughts, is too interesting for that, however bitter they may be. And he thanks Allah for two things: that he is an Afghan, and that he is Khushhal Khan!

Altogether he fits very little with the pattern of a lazy and dreaming “Oriental.” He is a fatalist, but for this very reason a man of action: What is going to become of one, will happen, so one can just as well put in a full contribution of life and energy. This is a subject he constantly returns to. “Every task to which a man bends his effort from the heart becomes a rose, even if it is a thorn bush.” And “every hour spent in

idleness is worse than slave labour." It is often a pure Kipling sahib ideal he praises: "Few are his words, his deeds many and accomplished in silence," says he about the chieftain—even if he is somewhat of too expansive a nature to be properly called a strong *silent* man—"His word's his word, his face his very face. Let him take the burdens of others upon him, but not lay his burdens on others."

Above all he hates pettiness, avarice and careful calculation. He wishes to die poor—as he did—after having spent his worldly goods on liberality and hospitality:

"He who plays with the World am I.
I am wearing it (as a dress), I take (my due) out of it, but I am not
bound by it.
I am as a stone against my enemies, but like wax to my friends,
In the roughs and smooths of life, such am I.
Against misfortunes I battle with the sword of my will in hand,
But I bow like the dead before the harsh biddings of Fate.
And if my pure heart is like the gentle spring rain,
Yet it can thunder when it must in my spirit.
Call me by any name it pleases you,
Human being, angel, demon, beast of prey, I am all things.
Fate raises and dashes me as time marches on,
I, Khushhal, understand not myself what I am."

As with most Persian and Afghan poets sensual love has a broad place in Khushhal. At times his imagery and attitudes are conventional and stereotyped, but here too he is more fresh and personal than most others. The proud Afghan never throws himself prostrate and humble in the dust before his beloved, as his Persian prototypes often do. We find no trace of the aberrations which are so common in Persian poetry. Pashto, with its distinction of grammatical gender, does not lend itself like Persian to camouflage the difference between "him" and "her." Even in his most direct speech he appears sound and not vitiated, and in his rules for moral conduct he disapproves of all sorts of excesses. Nor can he have been a degenerate harem-pasha, active and energetic as he was even in his old age.

But it is scarcely credible that earthly love was for him mainly a stepping stone to spiritual love, as Miss Ferozuddin thinks. He had clearly an easily captivated heart and up to a ripe age a wide awake eye for feminine beauty. He himself jokes about his white beard, which no longer charms the girls, and which it does not help to dye.

It is only occasionally that we find traces of an inner eye that saw more than physical beauty in women, and he pours out all the familiar complaints of all time against them, to Miss Ferozuddin's great chagrin. After all, he had the light of Islam to lead him in better ways! One of his wives has written a poem to him, while he lay in prison in India, and perhaps he stood closer to her.

Nor was the wine he drank only the wine of mystical ecstasy. At times he certainly fled from abstemiousness to the "wine from Portugal" and other strong drink. "As an elephant labours in chains, when Hindustan

appears in its dreams, so do I tear myself from piety and abstention when I remember my drinking companions."

In spite of this he could be a good Moslem and thank Allah for his true faith. But he is tolerant of Hindus and Christians, and he can also use the common language of Islamic mysticism. The dull orthodoxy of Akhun Darweza's fanatical followers in Swat was too severe for him :

"If Plato came to life and settled in Swat, and set forth for the
Akozais* in Pashto his Laws and his State,
They would only say: 'What is this?
The Akhun's book of sermons is good enough for us.'
What will a bullock make of sweet sugar-cane?
It feeds only on grass."

In his ethics Khushhal is naturally bound by his environment and headstrong as he is, he is not sparing of scorn and prayers for vengeance on his enemies. He had had bitter experiences and his political principles are simple and not unknown, even in our time :

"Until a chieftain has cut off many heads,
How will the plains and mountains of his land rest in peace?
Brother and son are slain in a chieftain's cause,
And to all who remain his commands go out.
Beside the water of the sword, no other streams are there
Which cool the fevered blood of him who seeks for war.
The tree of a Chief's domain well watered
By the blood of his enemies bears fair fruit.
Either like a man loosen the turban bravely o'er thy forehead,
Or wear in its place a woman's veil.
Ah God! for whom do I write? Who will heed me?
Yet so have I spoken verse by verse in this book."

"Lord, deliver me from blood-guiltiness: even now am I upon the sword to bring the innocent to the grave.

Verily, my lust maketh evil that which is good and the good evil: as for me I am always helpless before the bidding.

No infidel, no Hindu or Jew is so vile in that he doeth: no man so miserable as I know myself in the inward parts."

Often we hear such tones from him, and they ring true, because sincerity—anyhow of the moment—seems to mark all his writings. His religious poetry often bears witness to a profound feeling and is not merely filled with the set clichés of Moslem piety. We hear an echo of the Psalms of David.

He is himself aware of his special temptations—lust for power, riches and honour, favour of princes, love, hunting, beautiful houses and gardens, fine clothes and carpets, poetry and music. But highest he places indepen-

* Free and abridged translation!

dence of all external blessings. Time and again he declares himself happy to have been freed from Mogul titles of honour and gold, and all the responsibilities which were placed on him. "I am at heart happy like a clear star. Every hour is now a festival of freedom. For an Afghan his cloak and straw-mat are enough, I have no use for cushions and couches. I have freedom even if my clothes are simple. I am freed from the load of velvet and brocade."

Life in the open air, especially hunting, is his joy and delight, and he never gets tired of telling how wonderful it is to hunt on horseback over the plains with falcon or hound. There is a freshness breathing over many of these poems, and his pictures of nature often reveal a keen perception, even if one also comes across much that is trite. It seems characteristic of him that many of his poems begin with "When I saw . . .," and that altogether the verb "to see" is exceptionally frequent, while we seldom hear of "hearing." But such a subject would need a special study.

Above all his heart is tied to his poor homeland up by the Indus, and from prison in India he sends greeting with the morning breeze to Khairabad and Sarai and all the dear, familiar places:

"The trees of my homeland are sandal and aloe,
Its dust is all musk and ambergris.
If to others Sarai is a heap of stones,
To me its every stone is the purest gold."

To his love for his narrower home district is added a fellow feeling with all the Afghan tribes which he tries to unite for the common fight. He is consciously a national poet, such as it is difficult to find a parallel to in the East, before the influence of European nationalism set in the 19th century. Obviously his national feeling does not contain the same elements as our modern one. His definite objective is liberation from the Moguls, and he uses his poetry as a weapon in the political fighting. "This is not my tongue, it is a blaze. It fires off gun shots." True enough, he often chastises his own people and feels that he stands alone. "We talk the same language, we both talk Pashto, but we understand not in the least what we say to one another," he says to the people of Swat, and "I am the only one who thinks of my people's honour." But he never gives up appealing to his countrymen's longing for independence and to the memories, rich in honour, of the times when they ruled large parts of India.

He himself for long felt himself bound by loyalty and family traditions to the Moguls. But Aurangzeb's attacks, not only against him personally, but against the autonomy of the Afghan tribes as a whole, compelled him to break with them. "I tried to be a Mogul by drawing my sword for them, but I never succeeded. I remained the same Afghan I was."

When he made up his mind, he did so completely, and devoted the rest of his life to the fight. It is not surprising that he became the great national poet of the Afghans and Pathans in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But at other times, less original poets were more popular, because they were more accessible and followed better the regular patterns. Khushhal

is often rugged and scant in style, thoughts wrestle with expression in a little cultivated language.

His proper pride does not deny itself in him as a poet. He often praises himself, with some exaggeration, for having virtually created Pashto poetry, and he has little good to say of his predecessors :

“ When in Pakkhto Poetry I my standard rais’d,
The World of Words did I on my war-steed subdue.
The glow-worm was the hero of black night,
But like the morning-star did I eclipse his feeble light.”

Of the art of poetry he says in a poem which is rather more loaded with metaphor than usual :

“ As for the arrow a bowman is at need,
So for Poesy a Magician is required.
In his heart’s hand continuous the scales of metre held.
A stern informer he, if it be a foot too short or long.
The Bride of Truth should he mount upon her black palfrey,
O’er her unsullied face the veil of Trope held down.
Anklets should he place of Alliteration on her feet,
Rhythm’s neck-let on her neck, a mystery long drawn out.”

Khushhal’s metre is built on ancient Afghan traditions. It is in accordance with the very nature of the Pashto language, accentuating like ours, not quantitative like Arabic and Persian. Strangely enough, this peculiarity of Pashto metre has never been drawn attention to.* The rhythm is obvious to our ear, if rather hard and monotonous. There is a wealth of rhyming words in literary Pashto, so that formally it is easy to put into verses. Khushhal, too, can descend to fairly prosaic pedestrian rhyming. But the language itself in its uncultivated raciness is very expressive.

Khushhal cannot match the great Persian poets in refined harmony and picturesque imagery, nor yet in depth of thought. On the other hand he usually avoids the overloaded metaphors and the artificiality they, according to our taste, are so full of. Comparatively seldom do we meet with the empty jingle which bores us in much Persian second-rate poetry. Khushhal’s metaphors are usually definite and to the point, even if they can be naive, and one feels he is writing of living realities. One breathes in him neither the thinned stratosphere air of mysticism, nor heavy and sultry vapours of the jungle.

All in all, we can accept Miss Ferozuddin’s final verdict : “ Worn out metaphors and clichés, old faded flowers have no place in Khushhal’s fresh and flowering garden. There one hears the wind blow sough in the green foliage of a living language, and one draws in the sweet fragrance of the sweetness-laden flowers of natural sentiment.”

Of great importance to Khushhal’s development have been the rich experiences of a varied life, his acquaintance with various surroundings,

* Since this article was originally written, Dr. D. N. MacKenzie has published, in the Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, XXI, a detailed analysis of Pashto metre.

his position as a tribal chieftain and as a courtier, as warrior, refugee and serious student. But the basis must mostly be found in his own strong personality. Perhaps the effect of the contrast with most other oriental poets makes him loom larger than he actually deserves. Anyway, he is worthy of deeper study as the most important representative of a people which surely has many unused possibilities.

* It is not without reason that Major Raverty in his "Selections from the Poetry of the Afghans" from 1867—unfortunately as unpoetical as C. E. Biddulph's "Afghan Poetry of the Seventeenth Century" (1890)—has taken as a motto the well-known words of Gray's Elegy "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air."

To which may perhaps be added, as an echo, the popular Pashto verselet:†

"I hold a po'sy in my h'and here,
Let who'd enjo'y the flowers' fra'grance come then to me."

* In spite of this, some of them have had to be resorted to here. In the original article the selection of poems quoted was largely determined by the author's ability to produce readable, versified Norwegian translations.

† Quoted from Dr. MacKenzie's translation, which renders the Pashto rhythm.

