Women Poets Iranica
A Research Compendium

Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī and the Functions of Poetry

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May 12, 2025

https://poets.iranicaonline.org/scholar/asghar-seyed-gohrab/

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This article engages with a few aspects of one of Persia's best women poets, Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī (1883-1946), who uses poetry not for the expected usual reasons such as invoking lyricism, descriptions of nature, or mystical aspirations, but rather to depict her personal condition, her agonies, her private relationship with her husband, Persian patriarchal culture, and as a means to comment on the Qur'ān.[1] In this short essay I would like to hypothesize that poetry for Zhālah functions as therapy, the wiping away of unpleasant events she experienced during her life. As such, Zhālah's poetry is unique in the rich history of Persian poetry.

Figure 1: Portrait of Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī

Zhālah was born into the cultured Qāʾim-Maqām Farāhānī family. Her mother was the daughter of the famous minister, Mirzā Abu'l-Qāsim Qāʾim-Maqām-i Farāhānī (1779-1835), a poet and writer, and prime minister under Muhammad Shāh Qājār (r. 1834-1848). Farāhānī is credited with the simplification of Arabicized Persian prose, which had become hard for an ordinary Persian reader to understand. Zhālah was educated from early on in life. As she states in her poetry, she began her education at the age of five, following the traditional curriculum in subjects such as grammar, philosophy, Persian, and Arabic.[2] Due to financial problems, her father gave her hand in marriage to ʿAlī Murād Khan, a man in his forties, when Zhālah was only sixteen years old. She was against this marriage and this subject is a leitmotif in her poetry, in which she blames her parents. Zhālah criticised her husband and left him within two years.[3] She called this a "political marriage." The period in question was an unhappy one, something she refers to on many occasions in her poetry. On top of this, Zhālah's mother died, and only thirty-nine days later her father also passed away.[4] When she left her husband's house for her parental home, she was confronted with a brother addicted to drugs and alcohol. On top of all of these tragedies, Zhālah was not allowed to see her son again for twenty-seven years. After their reunion they lived together. This son was Husayn Pizhmān-i Bakhtīyārī (1900-1974), a prominent poet and translator who is known for his poetry on human dignity, his lyricism and, above all, his patriotism. His poem "Īrānzamīn," with the following opening couplet, is one of his most famous:

اگر ایران بجز ویرانسرا نیست

من این ویرانسرا را دوست دارم

Even if Iran is naught but a wasteland,

I am in love with this wasteland.[5]

[1]This article is based on my introduction in Mirror of Dew: The Poetry of Ālam-Tāj Zhāle Qāʾem-Maqāmi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, ILEX Foundation Series, 2014).

[2]See the couplet, "I went to school to read and write. / I was less than five years old, no more."

[3]It is not clear when Zhālah left her husband. It was certainly after the birth of their son Pizhmān because afterwards she did not see her son for twenty-seven years.

[4]Yūsufī, "Shāʿirī nā-āshinā," in Chashmah-yi rawshan (Tehran: ʿIlmī, 1371/1992), 427.

[5]See Soheila Saremi, in Encyclopædia Iranica, s.v. Pejman-e Bakhtiari, Hosayn, (online edition, 2015, available at www.iranicaonline.org/articles/pejman-e-bakhtiari-hosayn. The translation is by Soheila Saremi. For the original Persian see Divān-i āshaʿār-i Pizhmān-i Bakhtiyārī (Tehran: Dibā, 1368/1989), 424, line 1.

Zhālah is one of the first women Persian poets whose poetry expresses a female view, very different from that of other modern-day poets such as Tāhirah Qurrat al-ʿAyn or other Persian medieval poets such as Jahān Malik Khātūn (d.ca. 1382).[6] There is hardly a single poem that would have the reader wondering whether the speaker was a man or a woman. Of course, poetry should not be divided into categories such as male or female as it is the text that matters most, yet in Zhālah's case this is important because her poetry is an example of the plight of women in Persia. However, she did not write poetry for publication. However, hers is not a diary, intended to record the events she experienced like that of her contemporaries such as Tāj al-Saltanah (c. 1884-1936), the daughter of the Qajar king, Nāsir al-Dīn Shāh (r. 1848-1896). A generation of Persian women poets in this period composed poetry to display their talents, exhibiting their cultural engagement and their education, in an epoch in which female education was slowly becoming socially accepted. We certainly see in the poetry of women poets of this period how they see their personal condition, but the majority of their poetry has not yet been published.

Asking for Male-Female Equality

This female voice is strengthened by subjects associated with women in Persian culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Several of these topics, such as the traditional Persian wedding table, the ideal husband, the unborn child, reproaching one's husband, were treated by Zhālah for the first time in Persian. Another subject category is that of poems in which she talks to a soulless object such as a mirror, a Singer sewing machine, a comb, a curler or a samovar. In addition, Zhālah offers us a considerable number of poems in which she deals with various subjects, ranging from political issues such as personal freedom, patriotism, equality between men and women, social themes such as love, marriage (forced marriage), and drug addiction, to very personal topics such as the relationships between parent and child, husband and wife, and personal reflections on her

[6]There have been several studies on these poets in recent years. See Dick Davis, The Mirror of My Heart: A Thousand Years of Persian Poetry by Women (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2019); Davis, Faces of Love: Hafez and the Poets of Shiraz (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2012), 135-93; on Tāhirah Qurrat al-'Ayn see Amin Banani, Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry: Selected Poems of Qurratu'l-ʿAyn (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2004); on the poetry of the period see Seyed-Gohrab, "Poetry as Awakening: Singing Modernity," in A History of Persian Literature: Literature of the Early Twentieth Century: From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah, ed. A. A. Seyed-Gohrab (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 30-132; D.P. Brookshaw, "Women Poets," in the same volume, 240-310; Brookshaw, in Encyclopædia Iranica, s.v. Jahān-Malek Ḵātun. On the major poet of the period, Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, see Once a Dewdrop: Essays on the Poetry of Parvīn Iʿtiṣāmī, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1994); and more recent publications by Rivanne Sandler, "A Space Too Narrow: Reconsidering Parvīn Iʿtiṣāmī (1907-1941)," in Bright Diversities of Day: Essays on Persian Literature and Culture in Honour of M. R. Ghanoonparvar, ed. F. Farrokh (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2017), 112-25; and the unpublished dissertation

condition in a patriarchal society.[7]

Perhaps the most prominent subjects Zhālah covers appear in poems in which she analyses how people perceive the differences between men and women, referring to virtues such as chastity and continence which are commonly expected from women and not men. For instance, she says of longing:

مرد اگر مجنون شود از شور عشق زن، رواست

زان که او مرد ست و کارش برتر از چون و چراست

لیک اگر اندک هوایی در سر زن راه یافت

قتل او شرعاً هم ار جایز نشد، عرفاً رواست

بر برادر، بر پدر، بر شوست رجم او از آنک

عشق دختر، عشق زن بر مرد نامحرم خطاست

It is acceptable if a man goes mad, out of desire born of love for a woman,

because he is a man and his affairs are above why and how.

However, if a slight lust finds its way into a woman's mind,

even if killing her is not allowed under religious law, traditional law allows it.

Her brother, father and husband are expected to kill her by stoning,

It is wrong when a girl or woman loves a strange man.[8]

In another poem she states that men and women are created equal, but one is free, the other is imprisoned in a sack:

by Zhinia Noorian, Sapling of Hope: Parvīn I῾tiṣāmī (1907-1941) and Her Poetry in the Literary, Religious and Cultural Context of Early 20th Century Iran (Utrecht University, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, 2022).

[7]There are poets who refer to such paraphernalia, but their references are merely literary and do not have a personal function.

[8]All of Zhālah's poems cited in this article come from Seyed-Gohrab, Mirror of Dew, 85. On the notions of mahram and nā-mahram see S. Haeri, Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1989, 76-77.

در دکان آفرینش، جنس ما و اوست یکسان

عمر ما طی می شود در کیسه ای در بسته اما

In the workshop of creation, men's and women's genuses were the same.

But we spend our lives in a sack with a closed opening.[9]

Indeed, Zhālah is often occupied with the unequal treatment of men and women in Persian culture. Several of her poems deal with inequality, musing on why women are seen as inferior both by religious laws and in traditional patriarchal culture. At times, we witness her frustrations, and even anger.

Perhaps the most ferocious attack against men is the following passage in which she severely criticises men who apparently cite the Qur'ān to reinforce their superiority to women. Here Zhālah interprets the verses of the Qur'ān as emphasising the equality between men and women:

این کتاب آسمانی، وین تو، آخر شرم دار!

این تو، این آیین اسلام، آن چه می گویی کجاست؟

کی خدا پروانه بیداد را توشیح کرد؟

کی پیمبر جنس زن را این چنین بیچاره خواست؟

گر محمد بود، جنّت را به زیر پای زن

هشت و با این گفته، مقداری ز جنس مرد کاست

گر پیمبر بود، زن را هم طراز مرد گفت

وی بَسا حق ها که او را داد و اکنون زیر پاست

[9]The image of a woman living in a sack appears in the poetry of Nizāmī, one of Zhālah's favourite poets.

خود طلاق ما به دست توست، اما آن طلاق

گر زدین، داری خبر، مردود ذات کبریاست

آیت «مثنی ثلاث» اَر هست و«ان خِفتُم» ز پِی

آیت «لَن تستطیعوا» نیز فرمان خداست

چون تواند مرد عادل زیست با زن های خویش؟

کاین یکی زشت است وپیر، آن یک جوان و دلرباست

آیت «مثنی ثلاث» اَر جزئی از حق های توست

آیت «لَن تستطیعوا» نیز از حق های ماست

رو بدین فرمان نظر کن، تا بدانی کان جواز

تابع اَمری محال است اَر تو را عقل و دهاست.

This heavenly Book is yours: shame on you!

Here you are, this is the Islamic tradition: where can I find what you are saying?

Did God ever sign the licence of injustice?

Did the Prophet ever want the race of women to be so wretched?

During the Prophet's life, he put paradise under the feet of women;

By this, he took something away from the race of men.

So long as the Prophet lived, he considered men and women as equals.

[10]Mirror of Dew, 87.

Ah! Many rights that he gave to women are now trampled upon.

Even our divorce is in your hands, but if you know something of religion,

You know, such as that divorce is annulled by the Essence of God.

While there is the verse about "two, or three," it's followed by "if you fear."

The verse "you can never treat [them] fairly" is also God's decree.

How can a husband be fair to his wives

When one is ugly and old, and one is young and heart-ravishing!

If the verse "two, or three" is part of your rights

The verse, "you can never treat [them] fairly" is our right.

Go and cast your eyes on this decree so that you will know that

this permission is subject to obeying an impossible command,

if you have sense and reason.[10]

It is significant that Zhālah gives a poetic exegesis of the Qur'ān. By citing specific phrases, she criticises the way a patriarchal society has interpreted these passages for centuries, burdening women with emotional agony, not to speak of financial consequences. In this passage it is Zhālah who unequivocally condemns polygamy, showing that the Qur'ān has clearly made polygamous marriage conditional. Zhālah does not criticise the Qur'ān but her interpretation of the Qur'ānic phrases is clear as

one which "can never treat [them] fairly."

Features of Her Poetry

Zhālah's poetry is reflective in the sense that she contemplates ethical issues, writing about the meaning of life, what happiness means, and how death could be defeated in man's life. While her poetry focuses on her thoughts and feelings in relation to close family members, one wonders why she couched these personal subjects in the form of poetry. Why not in prose, by keeping a diary? The eminent Persian literary historian, Ghulām-Husayn Yūsufī, surmises that Zhālah composed poetry to "calm her vexed soul in isolation."[11] He continues, when a young, beautiful, talented, poetic, artistic, an avid reader, became the wife of an age-stricken husband, who treated her as a mere adjunct of the house, it was evident in what situation she lived in a corner of loneliness.[12]

Her isolation and poetry tempt the reader to compare her to Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), who lived in the small town of Amherst in Massachusetts. Like Zhālah, she lived an isolated existence, rarely leaving town. In the same way, Dickinson was not known as a poet in her lifetime. There are several similar metaphors that both poets use to express their conditions. The poems depicting isolation share similarities. In one poem Zhālah compares her imprisonment to the situation of a fly that can go wherever it wants:

دیوار های حرم بر فرقدان زده سر

پوشیده راه نظر، بسته ره نَفسم

آزاد پَر، مگسا! بر روی شهر بِچَم

مسکین مَنا که به دهر، عاجزتر از مگسم

سرتا قدم شَرفم، اما چو کج روشان

[11] Yūsufī, "Shāʿirī nā-āshinā," 428. See M. Khalīlī Jahāntīgh, "Muqāyasah-i shiʿr va zindagī-i Emily Dickinson va Zhālah Qā'im-Maqāmī," Nashrīyah-i adabiyāt-i tatbīqī 5 (1390): 126. Translations from Yūsufī's chapter are mine.

[12] Yūsufī, "Shāʿirī nā-āshinā," 428.

هم بسته قفسم، هم خسته عسسم

The walls of the harem tower above my head,

Blocking sight and suffocating me.

Fly free, O Fly! Flitter over the city,

How lowly my place in life, I'm less than a fly!

I'm noble in every bone, but I'm locked in a cage

And suffering under the jailor, like a miscreant.[13]

Similarly, Dickinson uses a gnat as a metaphor for freedom to express her isolation, while also alluding to the "smallness of her voice and person," very much comparable to Zhālah when she describes her position:[14]

… nor like the Gnat—had I—

The privilege to fly

And seek a Dinner for myself—

How mightier He—than I—

…[15]

We may never know why Zhālah used poetry to convey her emotions, to elaborate on private matters such as her relationship with her parents and the husband imposed on her, her pregnancy, miscarriage, and her opinions about other individuals. Her poetry is not autobiographical in the sense that she wanted to record the events—something that was very much current during the last years of the nineteenth century, if we look, for in-

[13]Mirror of Dew, 81.

[14]C.E.G. Benfey, Emily Dickinson and the Problem of Others (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 102.

[15]As cited by Benfey, in Emily Dickinson, 104.

stance, at the Rūznāmah ("daily-book") by Iʿtimād al-Saltanah, in which he offers a daily report of the events between the years 1292 and 1313 (1875-1895).[16] There are certainly verses which could be regarded as autobiographical, but these are too brief to be an elaborated autobiographical record. Zhālah refers to the age at which she began her education, and she also states that she learned specific subjects, but we do not know at exactly what age, at what level, or whether she liked certain subjects more than others. All this information is given to emphasise that she is intellectually superior to her husband, that she is emotionally imprisoned, physically abused, and intellectually wasted. The biographical information points to a frustrated young woman fully cognizant of her sad future.

[16]See Rūznāmah-yi khātirāt-i Iʿtimād al-Salṭanah, vazīr-i intibāʿāt dar avākhir-i dawrah-yi Nāsirī, marbūt bih sālhā-yi 1292 tā 1313 Hijrī Qamarī. Az rū-yi yagānah nuskhah-yi mawjūd dar Kitābkhānah-yi Āstān-i Quds (Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1966).

Poetry as Personal Document

It is by no means an exaggeration to state that the majority of Zhālah's poems are about her personal condition—as a daughter, a wife, and a lonely woman who is in search of love and an ideal husband. If we want to impose the concept of autobiography on her poetry, we may refer to the depiction of real people with whom she interacts. In her characterisation she uses certain emotive words and metaphors that suggest a certain type of person. To give an example, we can look at the depiction of her husband. This portrayal can be divided into physical appearance, emotional capacity, and intellectual aptitude. One example of each suffices here. The husband is depicted as an intellectually shallow and nationalistic man, who is against the Arabs and Alexander the Great, the two major invading forces in Persia. The husband is also against contemporary powers, yet he shows his piety through his long beard and loves the money he can earn from the Ottoman Turks:

ایران کُهن را به پیش چشم

بنهاده که گسترده کشوری ست

تاریخ جهان را به زعم خویش

تفسیر کند، خوش مفسّری ست

پیروزی اسکندر و عرب

افسانه اگر نی، تصوری ست

...

با جنس عرب دشمن است، لیک

آیین عرب را نه مُنکری ست

هنگام سخن، نیک مومنی ست

هنگام عمل، طرفه کافری ست

بد خواه به روس است و انگلیس

وز دولت رومش تنافری ست

با تیره عثمانی اش عناد

با لیره عثمانی اش سری ست

در مذهب او، آن بلند ریش

شایسته دشنام بی مری ست

He holds ancient Persia before his eyes

as if it is still a large Empire.

He interprets world history through his own eyes,

he is indeed a good interpreter.

Alexander's and the Arabs' victories

are just a myth, if not fantasy.

…

He's an enemy of the Arab race

but he does not disapprove of Arab traditions.

When he speaks, he's very pious;

when it comes to practice, he's a peculiar infidel.

Enemy of the Russians and the English,

he also hates European governments.

He is hostile to the Ottomans

but a friend of the Ottoman's Lire.

In his religion, the man with a long beard

deserves to be insulted without limit.[17]

[17]Mirror of Dew, 77.

In the matter of her husband's physical appearance, Zhālah compares him to a demon. Her description is not specific. We do not know how tall he was or what his facial expressions were, etc., but Zhālah refers several times to his beard and teeth. While the beard is like brushwood pricking her, the teeth are alluded to ironically and this may be a reference to rotten teeth and the bad odour coming from his mouth:

دست بر گردنم کند، گویی

نقش حماله الحطب دارم

نیمه شب، زان دهان خوش دندان!

بوسه ها بر دهان و لب دارم

When he puts his arms around my neck,

It's as if I am carrying brushwood.

Deep in the night I have kisses on my lips,

from the good teeth in his mouth.[18]

In several poems Zhālah depicts her husband as a man with little empathy and emotional capacity. Perhaps the most eloquent reference is the following poem, in which she refers to their age difference and wishes her husband dead:

دخترانش ز من بزرگ ترند

بمگو شکوه بی سبب دارم

بحل ست از جهیز و مهر اما

مرگ او را ازو طلب دارم

His daughters are older than I.

Do not tell me my complaints are unfounded.

I grant him my trousseau and the bride price,

but I do have one demand of him: his death.[19]

Zhālah's Poetry is Reflective

[18]Mirror of Dew, 163.

[19]Mirror of Dew, 165.

It is as if each of Zhālah's poems open a window onto a specific moment in her intense experiences. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of her poetry is the way she triggers empathy by sharing a very private matter such as her husband's nocturnal visits and how he pricks her with his beard, marital rape, and her candid emotional outbursts, all of which strongly appeal to the reader. Poetry lifts these experiences to the level of art, allowing the reader her own interpretations. This inclusion of the reader in Zhālah's private female domain is entirely new in the Persian poetic tradition. Persian poetry is rich in the genre of hasb-i hāl, in which the poet allows a person or even a soulless object to speak directly to the reader, but Zhālah's poems are different in offering an insight into the psychological depths of the conditions of a woman living in a transitional period of Persian history. She does not allow the reader to be indifferent to her experiences, as her depictions of a person, a memory, or an emotional scene leave an unforgettable impression upon the reader.

There is also a paradox: while the poet shares her emotions with the reader, the reader still has the feeling that he is furtively peeping into her innermost thoughts and feelings. This looms larger and larger in the reader's mind when one considers that Zhālah did not want to publish these poems. She wrote these poems for herself. In modern times we would call this "poetry therapy," or the writing of poems as a way of processing pain and suffering. Poetry helps her to heal her pain. Although the forced marriage offered existential security, the subjectively felt security is missing. We do not know whether Zhālah returned to her own poetry, read, and reread the poems—not just to improve their quality, but also to ponder on the contents, reflecting on a specific event, adding or removing lines. In one poem she says that she burned her collected poetry. Why did she burn it? Did the poems contain even more family secrets or explicit references to her situation? We do not know. We know that she composed these poems on pieces of paper and that her son, Pizhmān Bakhtīyārī, found them inside books in their private

library. He collected and published them after Zhālah's death. While we should be grateful to Pizhmān, the sad conclusion is that Zhālah's example could be regarded as the condition of a generation of Persian women in a warring situation. Writing poetry was a way to reduce her pain and agony.

A difference between poetry and prose in the writing of personal experiences is that poetry enables one to create a space in order to universalize personal pain, and human conditions, so that many people can make their own interpretations. Choosing to write her experiences in poetic form, Zhālah forces herself and the reader to transcend the usual personal thinking, inviting the reader to pause, to reread, to examine metaphors and imagery. Zhālah chose classical forms such as the ghazal ("lyric"), qasīdah ("panegyric"), qitʿah ("fragment") and rubāʿī ("quatrain"), forcing herself to respect the classical Persian poetic conventions. Zhālah could be considered one of the early modern women poets who use these classical forms for a new personal purpose. The classical ghazal, which is commonly used to proclaim the lover's unrequited love, is turned into a personal outburst of misery, social deprivation, and hopelessness. Thus, the impersonal ghazal has transformed itself into the personal song of an unhappy woman. It is this sad content in ancient form that has the utmost effect on the reader. The unfamiliar, the personal, is presented in a familiar form. Using a wide range of metres, creating specific rhythms, strengthened by rhyme, Zhālah's poetry is very powerful. Even those poems which are impersonal have rhythmic force.

Conclusion

We can draw a few conclusions from this short essay. Zhālah utilises poetry to express and to reflect on deeply personal experiences. Poetry allows her to invoke a poetic space between herself and others. It is in this space that she, for instance, defrosts her husband's icy house. Poetry removes the sharp edges of her existence, softening her life and making it bearable.

Despite the sorrow, frustration, and agony that the poet experiences, her poetry has a tender side with a philosophical turn. She often lingers on the notion of existence, on being a man or a woman. Although she answers questions such as why women are in the chains of religious laws or cultural principles and rulings, she invites her reader to ponder on the roles attributed to men and women in modern Persian society at the turn of the twentieth century. Not just due to its peerless poetic quality but also for the relevance of the subjects she treats in her poetry and the deeply personal bent she gives it, Zhālah is an exceptional woman poet who breaks taboos in her daring poems. Yūsufī praises her poetry, including her in his personal poetic canon of seventy classical and modern Persian poets. He characterises her poetry as "an example of a radiant genius, graceful, sensitive, and an astonishing artist,"[20] while also emphasising her power of imagination, intellectual vigour and the innovative ways in which she has coined words and metaphors. Yūsufī is right that Zhālah chose to compose poetry as a refuge, and it is this fleeing to and seeking shelter in art that probably enabled her to endure the pain inflicted upon her.[21]

[20]Yūsufī, "Shāʿirī nā-āshinā," 425.

[21]Yūsufī, "Shāʿirī nā-āshinā," 428.