



Women Poets Iranica
A Research Compendium

Tazkirahs of Premodern Women Poets

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The ancient Iranian king Bahrām Gūr, hero of Nizāmī’s romance, Haft paykar, was considered to be the first Persian poet with one extant verse to his name. This tidbit of information was mentioned by ‘Awfī, author of the thirteenth-century biographical dictionary, *Lubāb al-albāb*, and repeated in the fifteenth century by the Timurid author, Dawlatshāh, in *Tazkirat al-shu‘arā*, with an embellished narrative around the single verse. In his retelling, Dawlatshāh writes that Bahrām Gūr is said to have uttered the poetic half line: “I am that raging elephant, I am that attacking lion” (*manam ān pīl-i damān o manam ān shīr-i yalah*), to which Dilārām the harpist responded: “Your name is Bahram and your father is Bu Jabalah” (*nām-i Bahrām turā o pidarāt Bū Jabalah*).¹ In the nineteenth century, some Persian men of letters claimed that Dilārām’s response was the earliest verse composed by a woman in Persian, thus providing an originary moment of New Persian poetry by women at the same time as that by men.

The verses and biographical accounts of female poets appear in Persian anthologies and biographical dictionaries sporadically over a millennium, culminating in a surge of interest in the topic in the nineteenth century. The names of female poets were sometimes integrated into the biographies of male poets, but most often there was either a separate section devoted to them in larger works, or they were dealt with exclusively. There is also substantial evidence of the presence of close-knit com-

munities of elite women writing poetry in Persian, especially among the Timurids, Mughals and Qajars, but there was also a presence of non-courtly women such as courtesans or performers on the literary scene. Given this wide-range of interest concerning women poets both in and outside of the court, this essay offers a brief bibliographical survey of tazkirahs (biographical dictionaries) and anthologies produced in the Persianate world from the thirteenth to the end of the nineteenth century, covering both texts surviving in manuscript form and those lithographed in the age of print.

Selected verses by women poets are included in classical Persian literary anthologies, and the earliest of them are by the elusive Mahsatī, the two ‘Ā’ishah (Samarqandīyah and Muqrīyah), along with women only identified by patronymics: Dukhtar-i Husām Sālār, Dukhtar-i Hakīm-i Gāv, Dukhtar-i Satī, Dukhtar-i Sijistānīyah, Dukhtar-i Kāshgharī, and Bint-un-Najjārīyah.² Mahsatī was inscribed in the courtly poetic tradition although the meager details about her life have raised many unanswered questions. She was thought to have lived in the eleventh to twelfth centuries, and she may have been from Ganjah, but Nisapur, Badakhshan, and Khujand have also been given as her place of birth by later authors. The Sufī poet ‘Attār mentions that she served in the capacity of a secretary (dabīrah) or singer and musician at the court of the Seljuq Sultan Sanjar (r. 1097-1118), while the Mongol historian Hamdullāh Mustawfī, in his *Tārīkh-i guzīdah*, places her husband Tāj al-Dīn Ahmad ibn Khatīb in the court of the earlier and equally legendary Ghaznavid Sultan Mahmūd (r. 998-1030). Later, Dawlatshāh confirms the connection with Sultan Sanjar and lists her among the poets who had panegyricized this ruler. However, none of these sources are reliable.

A similar fate was reserved for Rābi‘ah of Quzdar or Balkh or Isfahan, who was appropriated into the mystical tradition. An account of her is found in ‘Awfī’s *Lubāb al-albāb*: “The daugh-

¹Dawlatshāh Samarqandī, *Tazkirat al-shu‘arā*, ed. E. G. Browne (Tehran: Asāfir, 2003), 29. ‘Awfī’s version of this varies slightly: *manam ān shīr-i galah manam ān pīl-i yalah / nām-i man Bahrām-i gūr o kunyatam Bū Jabalah* (I am that lion of the flock, I am that raging elephant. / My name is Bahram Gur and my patronymic is Bu Jabalah.), *Lubāb al-albāb*, ed. E. G. Browne and Mīrzā Muhammad Qazvīnī (Tīhrān: Kitābfurūshī-yi Fakhr-i Rāzī, 1982), 20. All translations in this paper are mine unless otherwise indicated.

²See Sunil Sharma, “Wandering Quatrains and Women Poets in the *Khulāsāt al-ash‘ār fi al-rubā‘iyāt*.” *The Treasury of Tabriz: The Great Il-Khānīd Compendium*, ed. A. A. Seyed-Gohrab and S. McGlinn (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2007), 153-169.

³Awfī cites two quatrains and two macaronic ghazals in Arabic-Persian by her, 548.

⁴One of these reasons is that she was “considered a threat by other poets (such as ‘Ubayd-i Zākānī) who vied with one another for the favour of the court,” Brookshaw, “Odes of a Poet-Princess: The Ghazals of Jahān-Malik Khātūn,” *Iran* 43 (2005), 185; ‘Ubayd apparently “lamponed her in disparaging and vulgar terms in at least two poems,” 174.

ter of Ka‘b, although she was a woman, was superior to men in accomplishments. She was proficient in both Arabic and Persian poetry. She used to constantly play the game of love and admired beautiful youths (payvastah ‘ishq bākhtī va shāhid-bāzī kardī).³ She was mentioned by Sufīs such as ‘Attār, as well as by Jāmī who calls her Dukhtar-i Ka‘b in his biographical dictionary of mystics, *Nafahāt al-uns*. Jāmī’s contemporary in late Timurid Herat, the poet ‘Ali Shir Navā’ī, was the first to include several short entries on female poets in his *tazkirah*, *Majālis al-nafā’is*, written in Chagatai and translated into Persian; his eclectic group of female poets included Bīdilī, Āfāq Bīgah, Mahsatī, ‘Ā’ishah Muqrīyah, and Bījah Munajjimah.

Dawlatshāh, also active in the late Timurid period, only mentions one other female poet in addition to Mahsatī: Jahān Malik Khātūn. However, neither gets their own entries but are mentioned instead in the context of the lives of male poets. The poems of Jahān Malik Khātūn, a contemporary of the fourteenth-century canonical poet Hāfiz, demonstrate that an accomplished woman such as her composed poetry and reflected on her place in the Persian literary tradition, but she was still marginalized for a number of political, social, and historical reasons.⁴ Jahān Malik Khātūn compiled her own *dīvān*—the only complete one to come down to posterity by a premodern female poet—and she even composed a brief introduction to it in which she mentions ‘Ā’ishah Muqrīyah, Pādshāh Khātūn, and Qutlughshāh Khātūn as her predecessors in a network of sisterhood across time.



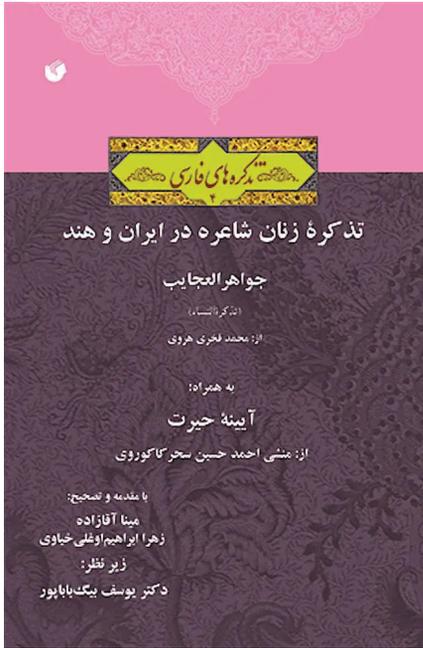


Figure 1: Book cover of Javahir al-‘ajāyib, also known as ‘The Biographies of Women’ (Tazkirat al-nisā’), Fakhri Haravi

By all accounts Javāhir al-‘ajā’ib, also known later as Tazkirat al-nisā, compiled by Fakhri Haravi, is a remarkable text that is the first work exclusively devoted to female poets. Fakhri was active under the early Safavid rulers and later at the Arghunid court in Sindh where he eventually dedicated his work to Māham Anga (d. 1562), the wet nurse of the Mughal emperor Akbar (d. 1605). His biographical dictionary includes around twenty-three women poets, although the total number varies in different manuscripts. Five of the poets were from the pre-Timurid period: Mahsatī, Pādshāh Khātūn, Jahān Khātūn, Hayātī, and Mihrī, while the rest were more or less contemporary, attached to the Timurid court. Fakhri compiled several tazkirahs and also translated Mīr ‘Ali Shīr Navā’ī’s aforementioned biographical dictionary into Persian. This work influenced almost all later compilers of biographical dictionaries of female poets in the Persianate world until the nineteenth century when it was lith-

⁵According to Maria Szuppe, “Although undoubtedly the Safavid royal women were given education, they do not appear in the available sources as accomplished artists or authors, while during the same period, the Mughal court in India, the most direct heir to the Irano-Timurid tradition, produced female writers, poets, and artists,” “‘The ‘Jewels of Wonder’: Learned Ladies and Princess Politicians in the Provinces of Early Safavid Iran,” in *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. Gavin R. G. Hambly (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 331.

ographed by the Naval Kishor Press in Lucknow in 1873 and 1880, around the time when a number of anthologies of female poets were also being produced.

The earlier tradition of including female poets in biographical dictionaries continued at the Mughal court, with the number varying of entries on women in different works.⁵ The Iranian émigré Taqī Awhadī penned biographical notices of and representative poetry by thirty-eight female poets in his *Tazkirah-yi ‘arafāt al-‘āshiqīn va ‘arasāt al-‘ārifīn*. Completed in 1615, this encyclopedic work contained accounts of around 3,000 poets in alphabetical order, breaking with the hierarchical *tabaqāt* system of organizing the biographical accounts and thus creating a universal community of Persian poets. Of all the *tazkirah* compilers, Taqī Awhadī seems to have paid a great deal of attention to using earlier sources and discussing the confusion between various poets, such as the two Ā’ishahs or the four Nihānīs. There is a fair representation of poets from the past and present, as well as from across the Persianate world. Most of the entries are brief, the longest being reserved for Bībī Mihrī Jalāyir.



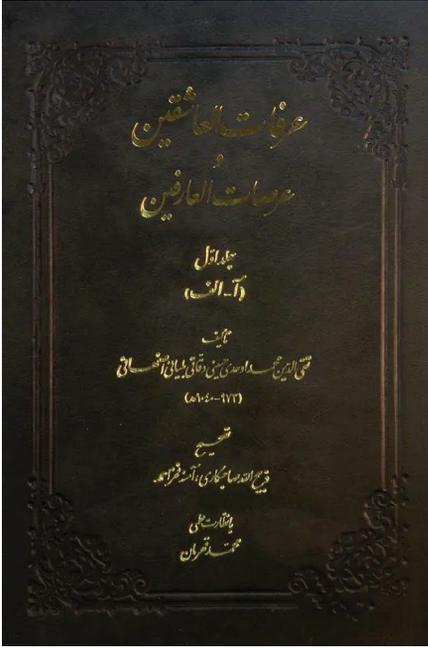


Figure 2: Book cover of Tazkirah-yi ‘arafāt al-‘āshiqīn va ‘arasāt al-‘ārifīn, Taqī Awḥadī,

At the end of the seventeenth century, in 1690-91, the Mughal official Shīr Khān Lūdī completed a tazkirah of 136 poets, Mir’āt al-khiyāl, organized under six categories of classical and contemporary poets, the last of which comprised seventeen women. He only provides two complete ghazals, a few quatrains, and some individual lines by these poets. About half of the poets are in common with Fakhri, and the closest contemporary poets mentioned are three Mughal women: the empress Nūr Jahān, who was of Iranian background; her companion Mihrī (not to be confused with the Timurid Mihrī Haravī); and Buzurgī from Kashmir. Often, the biographical details and anecdotes of one poet are transferred to another person, a characteristic feature of biographical accounts of women, and a poet’s nom de plume (takhallus) can be free-floating. Anecdotes of a sexual nature were particularly associated with women poets in order to highlight their verbal dexterity, although Shīr Khān does not seem particularly interested in salacious stories and the

⁶Several women poets used pennames such as Makhfi, Hijābī, and Nihānī, adding to the problem of identifying them correctly.

⁷Vālih Dāghistānī, Riyāz al-shu‘arā, ed. Muhsin Nājī Nasrābādī (Tih-rān: Asāfir, 2005), 1013.

women in his selection are of genteel background. The conversion story of a profligate character, as in the case of Buzurgī, a gypsy courtesan from Kashmir, as a result of a moral or spiritual crisis is a common trope in Persian literature. Somewhat surprisingly, the legendary Mahsatī does not figure in Shīr Khān’s list; perhaps she was not as popular in Mughal India as she was in Iran and Central Asia. Shīr Khān also provides two lines of poetry composed by Nūr Jahān herself, who, according to him, apparently used the takhallus ‘Makhfi,’ which creates some confusion since ‘Makhfi’ may have also been used by two other Mughal princesses, Salīmā Sultān Begum and Zayb al-Nisā (known as Zebunnisā), as well as by a male poet.⁶ Shīr Khān’s female poets seem to be a somewhat random group, and at least one manuscript of his work does not include the section on women poets at all.

The next century witnessed the continuation of these efforts with the inclusion of poets from more socially diverse backgrounds. The voluminous biographical dictionary compiled by Vālih Dāghistānī, Riyāz al-shu‘arā, completed around 1747 in Delhi, has around 2,500 entries among which are twenty-seven female poets. As with Taqī Awhadī’s ‘Arafāt al-‘āshiqīn, this work is organized alphabetically, and the female poets are not grouped separately but given a place in a single tradition. For Vālih, a successful female poet was one who wrote like a man; for instance, he compares Fātimah Khurāsānī to the epic hero Rustam and compares Lālah Khātūn to Alexander the Great. His disparagement of Jamīlah Khānum ‘Fasīhah,’—“One encounters few individuals of this sort, especially in this age when men have no talent, let alone women.”⁷—is echoed in the case of other poets as well. The classical poets Rābi‘ah and Mahsatī appear along with later figures ranging across all social groups as well. Sometimes Vālih expresses doubts about the authorship of a certain verse and offers his own view on the subject and frequently mentions Fakhrī and Taqī Awhadī as his sources for the accounts of some of the female poets he writes about. The longest entry in the Riyāz al-shu‘ara is reserved for Khadī-



jah ‘Sultān’ Begum, Vāleh’s cousin and beloved whom he had left behind in Iran because of a forced separation. However, most of this account is taken up by a description of Khadijah Sultān from a masnavī (romance) that his friend Fāqir Dihlavī wrote on this tragic romantic story. The second longest entry is on Mahsafī, whose poetry affected him profoundly. Overall, Vālih’s group of poets includes the usual princesses but also some unusual characters, such as: an Indian prostitute named Bījah Shāhī who composed satirical verses and about whom he speaks admiringly; Bībī Māhī Āfāq, who lived like a man (mardānah ma‘āsh mīkardah); and two women of Samarqand, Bībī Za‘īfī and Bībī Ārzū’ī who were apparently in a same-sex love relationship.

Vālih’s contemporary in Delhi, Sirāj al-Dīn ‘Alī Khān Ārzū, did not display the same inclusivity in his equally large tazkirah of around 1700 poets, dating from 1750-51, in which only three women were given their own entries: Dukhtar-i Kāshgharī, Hijābī, and Mihrī. This choice of representative female poets is surprising because the more frequently mentioned classical figures by other authors are missing. The entries for the first two are given only one line each, but Mihrī’s biographical account receives substantially more attention. Citing both Fakhrī and Taqī Awhadī, Ārzū quotes several verses by Mihrī, including a ghazal. At the end of this entry, he states in a misogynistic vein

Let it not be veiled that what I have learned about the powerful women of India is that they should have no participation in poetry. This is a sound idea because a woman never received prophecy. “Poetry is a part of prophecy. / The ignorant call it magic.” Apparently, the talent of women lies in the fact that they are born to be mothers and sisters of a person. Therefore, I have written very little about women poets.⁸

Ārzū prefers to keep women veiled and restricted to their domestic roles, even though by including three female poets he tacitly acknowledges their presence in the literary tradition.

⁸Ārzū, Sirāj al-Dīn ‘Alī Khān, *Tazkirah-yi majma‘ al-nafā‘is*, ed. Zebunnisā ‘Alī Khān et al. (Islāmābād: Markaz-i Tahqīqāt-i Fārsī-i Irān va Pākistān, 2004-06), 1423.

⁹Āzar Baygdilī, Lutf ‘Alī. *Ātashkadah*, ed. Mir Hāshim Muhaddis (Tīhrān: Amīr Kabīr, 1999), 445-52.

¹⁰The same language is used for Mahsatī in another manuscript as given by the editor in the critical apparatus. Āzar Baygdilī, *Ātashkadah*, 445, 449.

¹¹Āzar Baygdilī, *Ātashkadah*, 446.

At around this time in Iran, Lutf ‘Alī Āzar Baygdilī’s *Ātashkadah*, completed in 1760-61, also reduced the space given to female poets. The author included a separate section on eight women poets from ‘Ā’ishah to Nūr Jahān in alphabetical order: “On the lives and poetry of chaste women of every land who lived at various historical ages and who excelled all others in eloquence” (*dar sharh-i hālāt va bayān-i maqālāt-i nisvān-i ‘iffat taw’amān-i har diyār kih dar azminah-yi mukhtalifah budah va gūy-i fasāhat az hamganān rubūdah’* and).⁹ Female poets are not grouped into the three geographical divisions under which male poets are presented: Iran, Turan, and Hindustan; rather, they are lumped together irrespective of their place of origin. Five names, Mahsatī, Mihrī Haravī, ‘Ismatī, ‘Iffatī, Lālah Khātūn (Pādshāh Khātūn), had already appeared in Fakhri’s work, while ‘Ā’ishah Samarqandīyah, Mutribah of Kashghar, and Nūr Jahān are from other sources. Āzar’s selection of this small group of women would suggest that he may not have had access to the rich textual sources produced in Mughal India. The fact that he includes considerably more representative poetry by these poets than had been done before him may also indicate that his priority was quality and quantity of poetry rather than number of poets. For instance, Āzar includes several verses and complete poems by Mihrī and Mahsatī. He says about ‘Ā’ishah that he has not seen anything other than two quatrains by her and unfortunately “traces of her thoughts have vanished” (*nuskhah-yi khiyālāt-i ū az miyān raftah*).¹⁰ He writes about ‘Ismatī, the daughter of the qāzī of Samarqand, that it is difficult to find her poems, which “apparently have not come to Iran” (*ash‘ār-i ū gūyā bi-Īrān nayāmadah*). For Lālah—(Pādshāh)—Khātūn, he writes that “she ruled in a manly way and governed Kerman for a time” (*mardānah dar rāh-i jahāndārī qadam nihādah va muddatī hukūmat-i vilāyat-i Kirmān kardah*).¹¹ The anecdote, and the first of only two that Āzar provides, that Shīr Khān related about the empress Nūr Jahān and Mihrī the Mughal lady in waiting, is narrated here about the Timurid Mihrī and prince Shāhrukh’s consort Gawharhshād Begum. Āzar records an unprecedented number of quatrains—eighteen—by Mahsatī and



writes about her in admiration: “She is among the notables of Ganjah although some know her to be Nayshaburi. In any case, there has been no one like her in nature.”¹² He also informs his readers about the pronunciation of her name: ‘Mah-sifī’ (Moon Lady).

A few decades later, Mahmūd Mīrzā Qājār, the fifteenth son of the Qajar ruler Fath ‘Alī Shāh, brought out a small anthology of verses by twenty-eight female poets, *Nuql-i majlis* (1825), at the suggestion of his sister, Navāb Ziyā al-Saltanah. Dominic Brookshaw rightly suggests that Ziyā al-Saltanah should be credited with her contribution to the work and her role as patron and co-compiler cannot be overestimated.¹³ This work survived in only a few manuscripts and was never printed. Brookshaw also writes that

anxieties concerning women’s writing of any kind—and more specifically, sensitivities around the dissemination of that writing—should neither be ignored nor underestimated, since women’s writing was seen by many as the unwelcome intrusion of the female voice into the public sphere.¹⁴

Nuql-i majlis is divided into four sections: princesses (shāhzādagān); the emperor’s harem women (pardagiyān-i haramsarā-yi shāhanshāh); past and present female poets from Iran (shu‘arā-yi nisvān kih dar bilād-i Īrān būdand va hastand); and bawdy female versifiers of the past and present (khayriyat-i dallālāt-i mawzūnān-i nisvān kih dar rūzgār-i salaf būdah’and va hastand). The first three sections contain largely contemporary poets, while the fourth section narrates racy episodes in the lives of the poets Lālah Khātūn, Mahsatī, ‘Iffatī, Mīhrī, Mutrib, Ā’ishah, ‘Ismat, and Nūr Jahān Begum. Notably, *Nuql-i majlis* is apparently the only tazkirah in whose compilation a woman played a major role, and also one that was perhaps meant for private circulation.

Almost half a century later, in 1871, the Qajar polymath Rizā

¹²Āzar Baygdīlī, *Ātashkadah*, 448-452.

¹³“Qajar Confection: The Production and Dissemination of Women’s Poetry in Early Nineteenth-century Iran,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 17:2 (2014), 122-123.

¹⁴“Qajar Confection: The Production and Dissemination of Women’s Poetry in Early Nineteenth-century Iran,” 126.

Qulī Khān Hidāyat completed his monumental tazkirah, *Majma‘ al-fusahā*, in which only two classical women poets, Rābi‘ah and Mahsafī, and one contemporary poet, Mastūrah Kurdistānī, found mention. The two classical poets were legendary figures by now and had been romanticized in literature in various ways. Although compiled in a classical style, Hidāyat’s work was printed in Iran at a time when lithographic technology had transformed the modes of book production and circulation. Following closely on this work, the biographical dictionary by Ahmad Dīvānbaygī Shīrāzī, *Hadīqat al-shu‘arā*, dating from sometime after 1882, includes seventy-six female poets in an appendix (*khātimah*). As an administrator posted in various cities the author was able to access local texts and his emphasis is naturally on Qajar period female poets.

By the end of the nineteenth century, social movements such as the issue of women’s education and the popularity of print technology resulted in increased literacy and a less conservative view about reading poetry composed by women. In the span of a few decades, a dozen or so anthologies of poetry by female poets writing in Persian and Urdu were produced in north India. The earliest anthology was apparently *Bahāristān-i nāz*, compiled by Hakīm Muhammad Fasīhal-Dīn ‘Ranj.’ His work was published in 1864 at the *Matba‘-i Dār al-‘Ulūm* in Meerut. It was reprinted in 1869 by the same press with the help of the colonial official Mr. George Ernest Ward. A third corrected and augmented edition was published in 1882 by *Matba‘-i ‘Usmānī* in the same city. The last version included 174 poets: 46 Persian, 3 bilingual, and 125 Urdu. In the introduction to the second edition, Ranj discusses the importance of education for people, being especially impressed with how even ordinary British women were literate and had a literary sensibility. Relatedly, he wrote that his book was a small contribution to the spread of education. In describing his inspiration for it, Ranj narrates that one day his attention was drawn to the poetic skills of Makhfī and he was completely overcome by the experience of reading her verses. He wondered whether she, i.e., Zayb al-



Nisā ‘Makhfī,’ was the only superior female poet or if there were others. This led him to scour older biographical dictionaries for verses by women and he found dozens of fine ones. But he didn’t find an anthology exclusively devoted to women poets and decided to compile one—he may be disingenuous about this because Fakhri’s work was known at this time. Ranj goes on to declare that this collection was written as a lark (mazāqan), and someday he would write a serious book on the topic, which did not happen. Included in the very diverse group of poets are the usual classical poets, many royal women from the Mughal and Awadh courts, but also courtesans and prostitutes of his time.

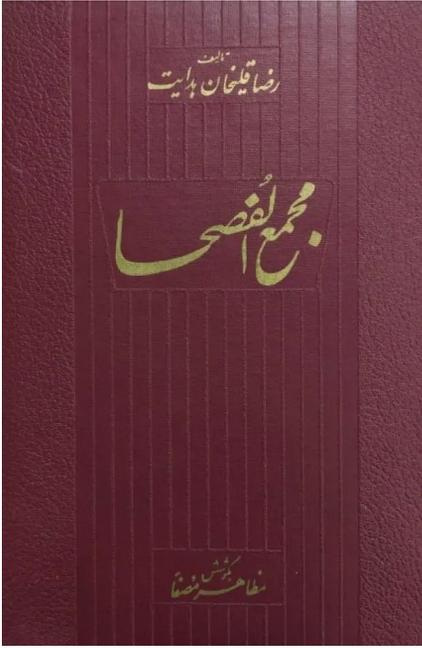


Figure 3: Book cover of tazkirah, Majma’ al-fusahā, Rizā Qulī Khān Hidāyat, 1871

Meanwhile, Durga Parshad ‘Nadir’ published the Gulshan-i nāz in 1876 at Matba‘ Fauq Kashi in Delhi. Written in Urdu like Ranj’s book, this was an anthology of female poets of Persian. Subsequently, Durga Parshad brought out Mirāt al-khiyālī in 1878 by the same press that focused on Urdu female poets.

Finally, the two books were published together as *Tazkirat al-nisā-yi nādirī* in 1884 by Akmal al-Matābi‘ in Delhi, in which, confusingly, the second part was now called *Chaman-andāz*. It is worth noting that Durga Parshad was from the *kāyasth* community, i.e., Persianate Hindus who were earlier employed as *munshīs* (scribe-secretaries) at royal courts, and he had a special interest in women’s reform. According to Sundas Amer, the author was steeped in the Indo-Persian tradition and he

clearly addresses a Hindu audience; he is concerned with a lack of education among Hindu women, and wants to challenge mindsets that cause low levels of education among Hindu women, not among Muslims. He almost seems to think that the Muslims have sorted out the matter of female education.¹⁵



Figure 4: A page of *Gulshan-i nāz* , 1876

Thus, the intended audience was not entirely women, but also men who actually controlled women's lives.

Two further anthologies written in Persian that included female poets writing in both Persian and Urdu appeared in print at this time. *Akhtar-i tābān* (1881) was compiled by Abū al-Qāsim 'Muhtasham' Shirvānī who was from a distinguished family of Indian Muslim scholars. The work was published in Bhopal by the *Mattba'-i Shāhjahānī, Dār al-Iqbāl*, and dedicated to the female ruler of the princely state, Shāh Jahān Begum (d. 1901), who naturally was honored with the longest entry.¹⁶ The compiler added two names in an appendix, Rābi'ah and Mastūrah, after he became aware of them through Rizā Qulī Khān Hidāyat's Qajar biographical dictionary. One of the last works in the nineteenth century was published in 1893, *Hadīqay-i 'ishrat*, compiled by Durgā Parsād 'Mihr' Sandelvī, another Persianate Hindu man of letters, who wrote his work for a local Hindu ruler who was also passionate about Persian poetry. Like other compilers before him, Mihr confesses to having had an intensely emotional response when he read the earlier anthologies of women's poetry, adding that he felt like an enflamed nightingale and a chicken with his head cut off. Other nineteenth century anthologies, most of them rare and some whose copies I have not been able to locate, are Durgā Parsād 'Mihr's *Tazkirat al-nisā* (or *Mir'āt al-khiyālī*, 1878), *Tazkirat al-nisā* (1889) by Muhammad Yahyā 'Alī Khān 'Nudrat,' *Shamīm-i sukhan* (1891) by Maulvī 'Abd al-Hayy Sāhib 'Safā,' and *Nashāt-afzā* (1892) by Mūlchand 'Ahqar.'

¹⁶See Annemarie Schimmel explains, "During the second half of the nineteenth century, when the interest in female education grew stronger in Muslim India a few collections of articles were dedicated to women who had composed poetry." "A Nineteenth Century Anthology of Poetesses," *Islamic Society and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Aziz Ahmad*, ed. M. Israel and N. K. Wagle (Delhi: Manohar, 1983), 51. A modern edition of this work without the part on Urdu poets was published recently in Tehran: *Muhtasham, Akhtar-i tābān*, ed. Muhammad Khushkāb (Tīhrān: Safīr Ardihāl, 2014).

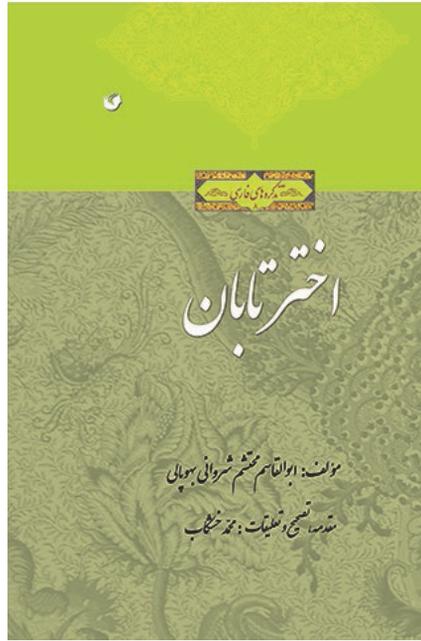


Figure 5: Cover book of Akhtar-i tābān, Abū al-Qāsim 'Muhtasham' Shirvāni, 1881.

A related work not directly from the Persian tazkirah tradition was the three-volume *Khayrāt-i hisān*, published in Tehran in 1887-89. It records the lives of notable Muslim women, some of whom happened to be poets, rather than poets who were women. In fact, this work was a version, rather than a translation, by Muhammad Hasan Khān 'I'timād al-Saltanah' (d. 1896) of an Ottoman Turkish work by Mehmet Zehni Effendi, *Mashāhir al-nisā* (1877-79). Many of the Arab royal women were replaced with Persian ones, mostly members of the Qajar dynasty. The best-known classical poets were represented in it: Rābi'ah, Mahsatī, Jahān Malik Khātūn, and Zayb al-Nisā 'Makhfī,' suggesting the formation of a canon of female poets. Another Persian version, *Tazkirat al-khavātīn* (1889), was published in Bhopal by Muhammad Rafī' Shīrāzī, an Iranian bookseller settled in Bombay, and was dedicated to Shāh Jahān Begum. This work is quite a bit shorter than the Turkish and Iranian Persian ones.



The most common term used in the nineteenth-century Indian printed anthologies to refer to female poets is *mastūrāt* (veiled women), which allows the authors to exploit the metaphor of unveiling as their poems find public readership. In a shift from the attitude in the early nineteenth century when royal women and those of dubious reputations were separated, as in *Nuql-i majlis*, by the end of the century they formed a single community of poets. An author such as Mihr asserts that women who are chaste veiled ones (*pardahnishīnān-i ‘ismatgāh*) and sellers of their splendor of the market of beauty (*jilvahfurūshān-i bāzār-i husn va jamāl*) complement each other, thus accounting for the great differences in social class and respectability. In fact, Annemarie Schimmel suggests that the vernacular Urdu was largely the domain of courtesans versus Persian which was the language used by royal women.¹⁷ However, this dichotomy between the chaste woman and the courtesan existed from the earliest times, exemplified in the creative biographies about the figures of *Mahsatī* and *Rābi‘ah*. Some of the terms used to describe non-royal women in the Indian anthologies span a wide range from minstrel, singer, dancer, to various words for prostitute: *mutribah*, *khunyāgar*, *raqqāsah*, *lūlī*, *shāhid-i bāzār*, *tavā’if*, *kasbī*, *ranḍī*, *badkāra*. This social inclusiveness also allowed for the occasional Hindu, Christian, and Armenian-Jewish woman poet to find a place in the company of Muslim poets. Additionally, while in the texts produced in Iran the meaning of *Persianate* meant *Persophone*, whereas in India, *Persianate* meant the inclusion of only Urdu, which was heavily influenced by Persian, but not other South Asian languages. Thus, in the Indian works there were also quite a few bilingual poets, albeit women who had composed a line or a poem in Persian as well as a more substantial corpus in Urdu, whereas in the works produced in Iran, the poems of women who wrote in languages such as Turkish or Kurdish in addition to Persian, were not mentioned.

¹⁷Schimmel, "A Nineteenth Century Anthology of Poetesses," 54.

The question about the audience for the late nineteenth-century anthologies printed in India is a thorny one due to various

historical and social factors. As lithographic printing replaced manuscripts, there were obviously more copies of books being produced and circulated, but we cannot say how extensively. The attention to and increase in female education also meant that more women, not only elites, were reading these works. But any substantial evidence about questions of audience and readership is scarce, other than the statements of the authors themselves. What is more certain is that there was a great deal of intertextuality at play where compilers of anthologies knew about each other's works. Printed books from Iran, such as the biographical dictionaries *Majma' al-fusahā* and versions of *Khayrāt-i hisān* circulated in India were used by anthologists. Almost half a century would pass until the middle of the twentieth century when there would be a renewed interest in compiling anthologies of Persian and Persianate poetry by women and individual studies on certain women poets. Several such works were produced in Iran, Afghanistan, and India, combined with an academic interest in the subject. In this way, Dick Davis's recent anthology can be understood as the latest in a long line of compilations of Persian poetry composed by women.

