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Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī, Composing Poetry without an Audience

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Zhālah Qā'im-Maqāmī and the Omission of the Audience in Favour of Feminine Poetry

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‘Ālam-Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī, who wrote under the penname “Zhālah,” is one of the most important contemporary women poets, and arguably the pioneer of feminine poetry, in Persian literature. She concealed her poems during her lifetime, but they were discovered and published in a *dīvān* (The Collected Poems) after her death. The secrecy that surrounded her writing gave her poems a unique mode and style and laid the path for feminine writing in Persian poetry.

This article examines the role of “the concealment of being a poet” and “hiding the poems from the audience” in the creation of Zhālah’s unique mode and style and discusses how “the omission of the audience” has given the poet the courage to write about whatever she wished. This courage has infused her poetry with sincere emotion and candid expression because she was neither writing to appeal to the taste of others nor engaging in self-censorship with the fear of the judgement of others.

Zhālah wrote openly and audaciously, since she did not have to worry about the judgement of an audience. Her audacious approach to certain subjects can be thought of as her greatest norm-breaking act, which is unprecedented in the history of Persian women’s poetry. Thus, Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī can be rightfully called the pioneer of Persian feminine literature.

This article begins with an introduction to Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī's life and works. It also addresses the question of her audience, the omission of the audience, the reasons behind this omission, and its influence on her poetry.

Review of Literature

That Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī has not received the attention she deserves among contemporary women poets is easily demonstrated by a brief comparison between the literature produced about her and that of other contemporary women poets. It is specifically curious that in the first decades of her entrance into the literary world, only short introductions or sometimes concise biographies have been written about her in books about literary women or about literary figures in general; for instance, "Zhālah Farāhānī" by Muhammad-'Alī Kishāvarz Sadr;¹ (A note on the poetry of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī) by Muhammad Ibrāhīm Bāstānī Pārīzī;² Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī by 'Abd al-Rasūl Khayyāmpūr;³ "Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī" by Mahmūd Hidāyat;⁴ "Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī" by Muhammad Hasan Rajabī⁵ (notes in books); and "What is remembered of 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī" by 'Izzat Haddād-zādah.⁶

Zhālah's personality and poetry are discussed in several longer articles about literary figures, such as "Shā'irī nā āshnā" (A unknown poet) by Ghulām Husayn Yūsifī⁷ and "Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī" by 'Alī Akbar Mushīr Salīmī⁸; or in the introductions or epilogues to her collections of poems, such as "Gūshah'hāyī az zindigī-yī shā'ir" (Parts of the poet's life) by Husayn Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī,⁹ with an introduction by Jamshīd Amīr Bakhtiyārī,¹⁰ (Zhāle's furious outcry) by Rūh-Anḡīz Karāchī,¹¹ "Introduction" by Asghar Sayyid-Guhrāb;¹² and also in articles focusing on various aspects of Zhālah's life and works, such as "Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī" by Maryam Husaynī,¹³ "Andīshah'hā-yī rumāntīkī-yī Zhālah Qā'im-Maqāmī bā tikīyah bar mabāhis-i ustūrah'ī" (Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī's romantic thoughts with an emphasis on mythological themes)

¹Muhammad-'Alī Kishāvarz Sadr, *Az Rābi' ah tā Parvīn* [From Rābi' ah Rābi' ah to Parvīn] (Tehran: Kāvīyān, 1353/1974), 143-44.

²Muhammad Ibrāhīm Bāstānī Pārīzī, *Khātūn-i haft qal' ah* [Lady of the seven castles] (Tehran: Dihkhudā, 1344/1965), 1416.

³'Abd al-Rasūl Khayyāmpūr, *Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī* (Tabriz: Kitāb-i Āzarbāyijān, 1339/1961), 1: 253.

⁴Mahmūd Hidāyat, *Gulzār-i jāvidān* [Everlasting garden] (Tehran: Zībā, 1353/1974), 585-86

⁵Muhammad Hasan Rajabī, *Mashāhīr-i zanān-i Irānī va pārsī'gūy az āghāz tā mashrūtah* [Famous Iranian and Persian women from the beginning to constitutional era] (Tehran: Surūsh, 1374/1995), 154-55.

⁶Rūh-Anḡīz Karāchī, 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Tehran: Dāstān'sarā, 1382/2004), 203.

⁷Qulām Husayn Yūsifī, *Chishmah-yī rushan: Dīdārī bā shā'irān* [Bright fountain: Meeting with poets] (Tehran: 'Ilmī, 1369/1990), 425-40.

⁸'Alī Akbar Mushīr Salīmī, *Zanān-i sukhnavar* [Eloquent Women] (Tehran: Dihkhudā, 1334/1956), 241-49.

⁹Husayn Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah)* [The collected poems of 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah)] (Tehran: Mā, 1374/1995), 4-22.

¹⁰Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah)*, 23-32.

¹¹Rüh-Angīz Karāchī, 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Tehran: Dāstān'sarā, 1383/2004), 181-201.

¹²Asghar Seyed-Guhrab, *Mirror of Dew: The Poetry of 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

¹³Maryam Husaynī, "Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī", in *Dānīsh'nāmah-yi jahān-i Islām* [Encyclopedia of the Islamic world], vol 22, (1396/2017): 197-98.

¹⁴Maryam Bayk, Hādī Haydarī-niyā and Mahmūd Sādiq-zādah, "Andīshah'hā-yi rumāntīki-yi Zhālah Qā'im-Maqāmī bā tikīyah bar mabāhis-i ustūrah-'rī" [Romantic thoughts of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī with an emphasis on mythological themes], *Justār'nāmah-yi adabiyāt-i tatbīqī* [Journal of comparative literature], no. 9 (1398/2019): 140.

¹⁵Ayūb Murādī, "Shi'r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī va difā' az huqūq-i zanān" [The Poetry of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī and the defense of women's rights], *Pazhūhish'nāmah-yi zanān* 13 [Women's studies journal], no. 3 (1394/2015): 147-161.

¹⁶Qudsīyah Rizvāniyān and Na'imah Ārang, "Barrisī-yi nimūd'hā-yi zībāyī'shināsī-yi zanānah nigar dar shi'r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī" [Analyzing feminine-looking aesthetics in the poetry of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī], *Pazhūhish'nāmah-yi maktab'hā-yi adabī* 5 [Research Journal of Literary Schools],

by Maryam Bayk and her colleagues;¹⁴ "Shi'r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī va difā' az huqūq-i zanān" (Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī's poetry and the defence of women's rights) by Ayyūb Murādī;¹⁵ "Barrisī-yi nimūd'hā-yi zībāyī'shināsī-yi zanānah nigar dar shi'r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī" (Analyzing feminine-looking aesthetics in the poetry of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī) by Qudsīyah Rizvāniyān;¹⁶ "Shā'ir-i āyīnah'hā: Jāyghāh-i vīzhah-yi ashyā' dar shi'r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī" (Poet of mirrors: the special status of objects in Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī's Poetry) by Na'imah Ārang;¹⁷ "Barrisī-yi shināsah'hā-yi shākilah'hā-yi zanānah'gūyī yā gūyish-i zanānah dar shi'r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī" (Investigating the characteristics and forms of femininity or feminine dialect in Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī's Poetry) by Maryam Bayk;¹⁸ and "Naqd-i ravān'shināsānah-yi ash'ār-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī az manzar-i rüykar-d-i ravānkāvī-yi Lakān bā ta'kid bar āfarīnandah-yi asar-i hunarī" (Psychological criticism of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī's poems from a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach with an emphasis on the creator of the work of art) by Maryam Ashkānī, Mukhtār Ibrāhīmī, and Parvīn Gulīzādah.¹⁹ These studies discuss the characteristics of Zhālah's personality and her poetry, praise her frankness and honesty as well as the femininity of her poetry, focus on her critical spirit, and criticize her self-exaltation and vanity; however, none of these articles feature discussion of the roots of those tendencies. It is most likely because of the relative lack information about this poet that these works have not paid due attention to the important issue of the presence or absence of the audience in her literary life. In fact, for gathering information about Zhālah's life and experiences, there are no other references than her own poems as well as the introduction written by her son, Husayn Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī, in her *dīvān*.

In this project, with respect to previous scholars who have taken various approaches to her life and poetry, I address the significance of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī's concealment of her art from a potential audience, and the consequences of this decision on the discarding of conservatism and self-censorship in her poetry. I



hope that this study will fill the gap in this research area about Zhālah, help us better understand one of the most important Persian women poets, and also lay the path for further studies in the future.



Figure 1- from left: Portrait of Pīzhmān Bakhtiyārī, son of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī, Portrait of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī, Qā'im Maqāmī's Poetry Book.

About Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī and Her Poetry

‘Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī, or, to use her pen name, Zhālah, was born in Farāhān in Isfānd 1262 Sh/March 1883. Her mother, Guhar al-Mulk, was Mu‘īn al-Mulk’s daughter;²⁰ and her father, Mīrzā Fath-Allāh, was Qā'im Maqām Farāhānī’s²¹ grandson. Zhālah went to Maktab (the Iranian traditional school), at the age of five and, thanks to her strong perception and memory, in just a few years she learned enough Persian and Arabic, made considerable progress in grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, and poetry criticism, and acquired a basic grasp of philosophy and astrology.²²

Zhālah went to Tehran with her family²³ when she was 15. One year later, she married her father’s friend, ‘Alī Murād-Khān Mīr-Panj Bakhtiyārī, who was in the army. She lost both her parents in the same year. She gave birth to her first child when she was 17, and her second child when she was 22. Later, she

no. 15 (Khurdād 1401/June 2021): 14.

¹⁷Na‘īmah Ārang, “Shā‘ir-i āyīnah‘hā: Jāyghāh-i vīzhah-yi ašyā‘ dar shī‘r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī” [Poet of mirrors: The unique place of objects in the poetry of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī], Kitāb māh-i adabiyāt [Monthly book of literature], no. 40, (Murdād 1389/August 2010): 48.

¹⁸Maryam Bayk, “Barrisī-yi shināsah‘hā-yi shākilah‘hā-yi zanānah gūyī yā gūyish-i zanānah dar shī‘r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī” [Investigating the characteristics and forms of femininity or feminine dialect in Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī’s Poetry], Tafsīr u tahlīl-i mutūn-i zabān va adabiyāt-i Fārsī (Dihkhudā) 15, no. 57 (1402/2023).

¹⁹Maryam Ashkānī, Mukhtār Ibrāhīmī, and Parvīn Gulīzādah, “Naqd-i ravān‘shināsānah-yi ash‘ār-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī az manzar-i rüykard-i ravānkāvī-yi Lakān bā ta‘kīd bar āfarīnandah-yi asar-i hunarī” [Psychological criticism of Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī’s poetry from the perspective of Lacan’s psychoanalytical approach with an emphasis on the creator of the work of art], Mutālī‘āt-i hunarī-yi Islāmī 19, no. 49, (1402/2023): 7-35.

²⁰Mīrzā Abu al-Qāsim Mu‘īn al-Mulk, a statesman in the Qājār period, was one of the descendants of the prophet in Tafrīsh, Iran, and the son of Mīrzā Sayyīd Ismā‘īl, one of the scribes in the court of ‘Abbās Mīrzā in Tabriz. He was appointed the scribe of the army in 1277/1898 and then guardian of Āstān-i Quds-i Razavī in 1287/1908.

²¹Mirzā Abu al-Qāsim Farāhānī, grand vizier, statesman, and literary figure of the Qājār period.

²²These types of education were exclusively available to aristocrats and members of the upper class. If we consider being educated as one of the most important differences between Zhālah and the other women around her, we should remember that this education was the result of her family's economic and symbolic situations, privileges that were not readily accessible to other girls. The next section discusses how this class distinction, and, consequently, Zhālah's cultural and educational superiority, played a significant role in her distancing from others, her constant discontent, her vanity, her self-denunciation, her constant criticism toward others, and eventually, her loneliness and reclusiveness.

²³The relocation of Zhālah's family to Tehran was the result of her father's disagreements with his relatives.

²⁴After the separation, her children were first under the guardianship of their father. After 'Alī Murād Khān's death, they were under the guardianship of 'Alī Qulī Khān Sardār As'ad and Ja'far Qulī Khān Sardār As'ad.

²⁵Sūrūs Shamīsā, *Kulliyāt-i sabk'shināsī* [Fundamentals of stylistics] (1st repr. ed., Tehran: Mitrā, 1384/2005), 1: 17.

left her husband and children²⁴ and went back to Farāhān to take care of her ill and disabled brother. When she was twenty-six, her husband died. At the age of 44, she went back to Tehran to live with her older son, Husayn Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī, who later became a well-known poet. She lived with him to the end of her life on 5 Mihr 1325/ 27 September 1946, at the age of 63.

Writers and their works are influenced by their sociopolitical contexts; in other words, "social and political changes in a society are the catalysts of literary changes, too."²⁵ However, it is curious to see that Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī, who had deprived herself of a social life, was not deeply influenced by important events throughout her lifetime, which included the assassination of Nasīr al-Dīn Shāh Qājār when she was 12, the issuing of the Constitutional Law by Muzaffar al-Dīn Shāh and his death when she was 23, the removal of Muhammad 'Alī Shāh Qājār from the throne and the accession of Ahmad Shāh when she was 26, the 17 unsettled years of Ahmad Shāh's reign and the period of direct interference of Russia and England in Iran, and the 16 years of Reza Shah's reign and the first 5 years of Muhammad Reza Shah's reign. These events and others had considerable effects on the elite and literary figures of the time.

In those years, the constant shifts in political power and the accelerated social changes made women poets acquainted with different methods and tendencies as well as common historical, social, and cultural experiences, which encouraged them to publish their poems for the general audience. However, during the same period, Zhālah hid her poems, denied being a poet, distanced herself from the literary and cultural movements of her time, and never set foot outside the safe environment of her house. In fact, "although in the years between 1300/1921 to 1325/1946, the political and social factors were favorable toward changing the status of women from traditionalism to modernism, Zhālah practically went against the flow and preferred being a traditional woman and remained silent about her poetry and her modernist feminist dreams which could have attracted



a lot of attention at that time.”²⁶ For various reasons discussed below, she preferred solitude and distance. She was “either unaware of the political, social and literary changes of the time, or unheeding of them all. Perhaps this is why no social dream is reflected in Zhālah’s poetry but the issue of women.”²⁷ Even when, influenced by the dominant environment in the literary arena, she writes about women’s issues of the day in “Prediction of Women’s Freedom,” she openly admits that she does not have much knowledge of these issues:

What is freedom? I know not. But I know

That it’s a soothing salve on my body-decaying wound.²⁸

Furthermore, in her poems about the similarity of the creation of man and woman, the equality of men’s and women’s rights and the differences between men and women, Zhālah makes generalizations that can be perceived as sexist. The more we delve into her poems, the more we realize that she does not have a coherent understanding of the social issues of the day. Lines such as “I’ll grapple hand to hand with courageous men”, “My vision is vaster than your field of vision”, and “A woman is like you, if not even higher than you” that address the contrasts between men and women also reveal that even though she lived in a momentous era in terms of gender relations, she did not have a deep understanding of these changes.

Husayn Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī, Zhālah’s son who lived with her in her last nineteen years, has said of her, “My mother was not only denying being a poet but also rejected the attribution of a few rubā’īs [quatrains], which were found by one of the relatives, to herself, and when she saw these poems published in the collection Best Poems in 1312/1933, she became extremely upset and admonished me.”²⁹ In fact, Zhālah Qā’im Maqāmī concealed her literary activities for years; when, on the insistence of her son, she was finally forced to confess to having written some poems, she said that she had burned a collection of

²⁶Karāchī, ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī, 3.

²⁷Karāchī, ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī, 181.

²⁸Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 86.

²⁹Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 14.

³⁰Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī's *Dīvān* was published in 1345/1966, almost 20 years after her death, containing 52 poems in traditional forms of *qasīdah* (long lyric poem), *ghazal*, and *rubā'ī* and *du bayfī* (two verses) in 109 pages, including an introduction and three poems by her son Husayn Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī and a short note by Jamshīd Amīr Bakhtiyārī. In 2004, Zhālah's poems were once again revised and published by Dr. Rūh-Angīz Karāchī, with an informative introduction by the editor and a number of notes by other writers. In 2014, Zhālah's poems were translated into English by Asghar Seyed-Gohrab and were published under the title *Mirror of Dew: The Poetry of Ālam-Tāj Zhāle Qā'em-Maqāmī* by Harvard University Press.

her *ghazals*. The poems that remain today are manuscripts scattered randomly among her books and notebooks and found and collected by her son after her death. Nevertheless, this small *dīvān*,³⁰ including 917 lines of poetry, contains examples of the most honest and audacious poems written by an Iranian woman.

Writing, especially writing poetry, is power, and writing has always been a subversive act for women. In writing poetry, women break boundaries and enter territory that had previously been forbidden to them, and in so doing liberate themselves from the future that would otherwise have been predestined for them. In the literary history of Iran, women's poetry began almost simultaneously with men's poetry. From the beginning of the history of Persian poetry to the end of the A.H. 6th/12th Century, women poets such as Rābi'ah Balkhī and Mahsitī Ganjavī wrote audaciously about their feminine status, addressed their male lovers, talked about their wishes and desires, and foregrounded their individuality. However, after the A.H. 6th/12th Century, this approach changed completely. The establishment of theological schools, or *Nizāmiyyah*, throughout the Islamic territory under the influence of strict thinkers such as Nizām al-Mulk and Muhammad Ghazālī led to the spread of fundamentalism and strict approaches to religion. Also, the spread of mysticism and determinism and the publication of many didactic books advocating the condemnation, humiliation, and limitation of women led to serious changes in the types and styles of women's lives and the orientation of their poetry. As a result, from the beginning of the A.H. 7th/13th Century, women's poetry changed its direction, and its social outlook and innovative perspective was redirected into an even more conservative approach than men's poetry.

The first poems written by women emphasizing chastity and remaining unseen in society appeared at the beginning of the A.H. 7th/13th century. This remained the dominant subject matter of women's poetry to the middle of the 13th/19th century, when "at the time of the Constitutional Revolution, literary discourse



came under the influence of the western cultural discourse and the issue of the 'self' with a specific aesthetics became prominent in women's poetry."³¹

This change in discourse and aesthetics is easily observable in Zhālah's poetry. Zhālah readily reflected her personal thoughts in her poems; therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that in Persian poetry, individuality and the female world were openly manifested for the first time in Zhālah's poetry. According to the existing documents, Zhālah was the first woman poet to address her personal issues so audaciously; and although she had no intention of writing feminine poetry, her feminine mentality has created a female language which clearly depicts a woman's hopes and desires.

Zhālah's distinctly feminine approach to poetry is in exact contrast with the traditional values imposed on women for writing in obscurity and behaving according to the traditions of Iranian society because "in the cultural structure of Iran in the Constitutional era, observing expediency, obedience and following the accepted traditions were considered as valuable, especially for women, and any norm-breaking behaviours was met with punishment."³² However, Zhālah was distinctive in both her poetic expression and her attitude. She criticized the despotic behaviours of her relatives, parents, and husband, but in secret. She protested against unjust rules and immoral social principles, but in secret. She expressed her discontent about her life conditions, but in secret. She criticized women's oppression and the social injustices toward them, but in secret. She raged against the dominant traditions and explicitly showed her female outlook, but in secret. These "outcries of rage in secret" are incredible contradictions in Zhālah's life and poetry and can lead us to the missing link in the chain of the enigma of her literary life: how a woman, in the closed structure of the patriarchal system of Persian poetry, was able to express her most intimate thoughts in the most honest way with the loudest voice possible, and yet keep this outcry in the confines of her own house, to be

³¹Rizvāniyān and Ārang, "Barrisī-yi nimūd'hā-yi zibāyī'shināsi-yi zanānah nigar dar shi'r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī," 14.

³²A'zam Dilbarī, Fazl-Allāh Razavīpūr and Ārash Shafaqī, "Barrisī-yi ab'ād-i zhi'u-kāl-chirī-yi fimīnism dar ash'ār-i manātiq-i jughrāfiyā-yi Fārs va Arab zabān: Mutālī'ah-yi murīdī-yi 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah) va Ghādah al-Sammān [Investigating the geocultural dimensions of feminism in the poems of Fars and Arabic-speaking geographical regions: a case study of 'Ālam Tāj (Zhālah) Qā'im Maqāmī, and Ghadah al-Sammān], *Majalah-yi jughrāfiyā va barnāmah rīzī-yi mantaqah-ī* 13 [Quarterly of geography and regional planning], no. 1, (1402/2023): 124.

³³In fact, the missing link in this chain is the absence of the audience, or put more bluntly, the omission of the audience by the poet, which made it possible for her to talk freely without the fear of being judged and condemned. But what is more important than the absence of the audience and the omission of the audience is the reason for this omission, to which we will return later.

³⁴Rizvāniyān and Ārang, “Barrisi-yi nimūd'hā-yi zibāyī'shināsī-yi zanānah'nigar dar shi'r-i Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī”, 16.

³⁵Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 15.

heard years later by Persian literary society.³³

Rizvāniyān and Ārang point out that “[i]n Zhālah’s poetry, we come across subject matters which have not been used in women’s poetry before, such as sexual discrimination and inequality, breaking the taboo of writing about one’s own and other’s bodies, advising women who are unaware of their identities and rights, and finally, the disappointment and despair resulting from the inability to change the existing conditions.”³⁴ In fact, Zhālah was a perceptive observer of the living conditions to which most of her fellow contemporary women had succumbed peacefully, to the point that they either ignored the injustices dominant in their lives or accepted them in silence. However, she was an analytical witness, even though she was also silent in a different way, as she addressed these issues and expressed her discontent, but she never let anyone hear her voice.

One of the characteristics of Zhālah’s poetry which was unprecedented in her time is the remarkably honest and distinctively feminine tone with which she expresses her thoughts and emotional needs. Her poems are thus personal confessions through which readers find their way to her world of thought. Zhālah’s poetry is the personal memoir of a woman with a naked expression which reflects her discontent with gender oppression in the patriarchal culture. It is a personal journal, both narrating the personal experiences of a woman and reflecting the collective experiences of women.

There is no doubt that Zhālah did not have a considerable social life. Her son, who can be considered the closest individual to her with regards to her character and disposition, writes in the introduction to her *dīvān* that “Zhālah was the poet of her own self and her own sufferings and failures; she generally kept her distance from the society and the outside world.”³⁵ This relinquishing of the outside world and society is a clear sign that she has basically omitted the element of “audience” in a certain moment of her literary life, if not in all the moments of her writ-



ing poetry.³⁶ Her act of omitting the audience is a moment that should be held in high esteem in the history of Iranian women poets as an invaluable act.

Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī and the Audience

The audience of Zhālah's poetry is not an individual or plural "you" in front of whom the poet traditionally sits and speaks in the realm of imagination. The audience of her poetry both is and is not; both exists and does not exist; both hears and does not hear. In simpler terms, instead of an individual or plural "you," Zhālah posits a real "I" who takes different forms in different situations, such as a mirror, a sewing machine, a comb, a baby in the mother's womb, or a deceased mother. However, behind all these masks stands the poet herself; there is no stranger involved. This is what allows the poet to talk openly and frankly since she is sitting in front of herself. This approach can be readily observed in these lines:

I tell tales for myself, I sing elegies for myself,

The listening ears are mine; the eloquent tongue is mine.³⁷

Zhālah sometimes directly points out that she does not have any audience for what she is writing:

Zhālah, night is approaching, get up and think of hair dye,

For what audience are you opening the gates of speech?³⁸

Sometimes she shows her unwillingness to have an audience for her poems by referring to the burning of her poems.

I will intentionally put fire to my own dīvān

Before fire catches up on my book.³⁹

³⁶Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī has a number of poems that are didactic and addressing women. This article focuses on her non-didactic poems.

³⁷Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 77.

³⁸Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 33.

³⁹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 75.

⁴⁰Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 8.

⁴¹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 10.

⁴²Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 83.

⁴³Ārang, "Shā'ir-i āyīnah'hā," 48.

Therefore, in her own eyes, her poems were not meant to be read by others; the hypothetical audiences of her poems are all masks on the face of a poet who would sit in front of herself and listen to her own poems. Nevertheless, these imagined audiences can be classified into three main groups: herself, people, and objects. In front of herself, she talks about her sufferings and problems with an analytical view; therefore, these poems are regretful whispers. In front of others, she sometimes gives advice in some of her didactic poems, but often engages in complaining, criticizing, and chastising people. In front of objects, she reveals her most hidden scars and pours her heart out to them.

A. In addressing herself, Zhālah analyzes her unfavourable situation in regretful whispers; she actually thinks loudly, asking herself questions such as "why am I in this situation?", "what should I do?", or "How come the reality is so different from my expectations?":

I'm in this mirror, the only one who knows my pain,

To whom can I tell my suffering if not to the mirror?⁴⁰

What's life but an image mixed with dream?

It's comfort mixed with pain, passion with ennui.⁴¹

I told myself if from this Bakhtiyārī

I get free, I'll be blissful

If I get separated from him, there would come peace

To my worn-out body and weary soul.⁴²

B. She engages in conversation with the objects around her "like family members with whom she can talk and from whom she can expect sympathy and kindness"⁴³:



For whom am I telling my story? For whom is this coquetry?

⁴⁴Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 66.

For a rival whose reason can be compared to an animal's.

⁴⁵Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 30.

How long should I talk to myself in the mirror?

⁴⁶Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 35.

Until a faint wish emerges from the mirror.⁴⁴

The most striking manifestations of Zhālah's loneliness can be found in these poems, whose audiences are lifeless objects, such as a sewing machine, a samovar, or a comb. It should be noted that addressing lifeless things, whether natural elements or even abstract concepts, has a long history in Persian literature; however, in Zhālah's poetry, these objects are the first and last audiences, and these poems are not meant to be heard by any other audience:

⁴⁷Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 39.

⁴⁸Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 57.

By truth, what magics you do, oh Zinger machine,

You're not alive yet revive the spirits like Christ.⁴⁵

Oh, ancient comb, for a few days,

I could not see you, where've you been?⁴⁶

Oh, my lovely companion

My friend, my samovar,

It is from your whisper that fog

Wraps around my delicate cup.⁴⁷

Oh, come, my old waistcoat

My friend in drunkenness and soberness.⁴⁸

⁴⁹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 57.

⁵⁰Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 27.

⁵¹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 42.

⁵²Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 58.

It curls upon itself and does not say a word

Oh curler, what have you said to my hair? Speak!

Oh curler, if there's a fog sitting on your chest

Tell it swiftly, I'll hear it with my forgiving tears.⁴⁹

The most important object is the mirror:

Who is this grief-stricken lunatic, oh mirror?

My sight is lost by this black smoke, oh mirror!⁵⁰

Oh mirror, I can be freed from sorrow

Perhaps with a lie my heart gets happy.⁵¹

If I was separated from you a few days, oh mirror,

I didn't forget your memory, come oh mirror!⁵²

C. Zhālah's addressing of other people can be divided into different categories. Some of her poems have real audiences. These are didactic poems that address "women" in general. One can justify the writing of such poems by pointing out that, apart from the oral advice which is associated with the pulpit and the school in Iranian culture, giving advice has had a long and respectable history in many "advice-books" before the entrance of Islam into Iran. This tradition was continued into the Constitutional era. A poet who gives advice presupposes a power in him/herself by which he/she can influence others; that power is the power of speech, especially poetic speech. Women are perceived as "basically devoid of the official power of men," so when a few of them "are endowed with the power of knowledge, they make use of the same advising discourse as men do in order to awaken the unaware and oppressed women. Hence,



the poems in Parvīn I‘tisāmī’s Dīvān are seldom without a hint of advice. Zhālah also gives advice to women in many instances to try to make changes in their situations.”⁵³ The effect of sociopolitical contexts on these poems should not be ignored. At a cultural moment when whispers about the changes in women’s social and cultural situation were heard, subject matters related to “teaching women” could have been easily turned into a common subject matter. Zhālah continues this tradition in poems such as these:

Woman! Make a movement so the world can see

That what we have is not surpassed by man.⁵⁴

For women to be freed from this man-made prison,

We need hands and feet, and we have it, but in chains.⁵⁵

So, oh sister, oh daughter, oh companion,

These heavy chains are no longer fit for you.⁵⁶

Some of Zhālah’s poems have audiences such as “the unborn child” and “the deceased mother”; audiences that basically do not exist and cannot hear. Therefore, her conversation with these audiences is actually complaining whispers with their empty places:

Oh, my second child, hiding in my chest,

Cut your bond with me, whether you’re a boy or a girl

One came out, but you shouldn’t come out of my womb

One threat is enough to keep me in prison.⁵⁷

What if I didn’t get married, oh mother,

⁵³Rizvāniyān and Ārang, “Barrisī-yi nimūd’hā-yi zibāyī’shināsi-yi zanānah nigār dar shi’r-i Zhālah Qā’im Maqāmī,” 19.

⁵⁴Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 3.

⁵⁵Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 13.

⁵⁶Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 34.

⁵⁷Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 16.

What if I didn't put myself in misery?

You are in the ground with father, and so is my husband

I wish I could stop telling this tale to my stationery.

You're in the ground and I'm burning over your grave like a candle

Else ways I'd not attack your pile of ashes.⁵⁸

Some of Zhālah's poems are addressed to her relatives; for example, "Jealous," though addressed to her uncle's daughter, has a unique frankness which makes it obvious that it was not supposed to be read by her:

I'll not judge you for being jealous, because

A woman's heart can't be cured of this tormenting pain

Let me tell you this delicate matter, because

Your petty mind seems not aware of this point.

It's your own fault if your husband's not satisfying

That donkey is your commander, not your captive.

In the house, your clothes are shabby and your body filthy

As if there's no washroom or no silk there

Your hair sees no comb and your face no washing

For God's sake, your body is not a chest of perfumes.

You're impatient, expecting too much, shoddy and without makeup,



And you're ever complaining that my husband is not a devotee.⁵⁹

⁵⁹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 49-53.

Another example is “The Neighbour Man,” which was unlikely to have been read by the person to whom it is addressed:

⁶⁰Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 101.

It's more than six years that you've been our neighbour

But what have you seen from me, oh you stupid little man?

From me, who am honor, shame and piety from head to toe,

You're asking for sexual favors? Alas, you're not a human!⁶⁰

Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī and the Omission of the Audience

Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī openly writes about her most intimate sufferings, criticizes the closest people in her life, and reveals with utmost honesty her deepest regrets without even thinking about how her audience would deal with her poems, because by hiding her art, she essentially omitted the element of the audience from her literary life. Why would a poet omit the audience from her literary life by hiding her work and even denying being a poet? Why did she decide to keep her poems out of the reach of others and nip their admiration, disapproval, criticism, and even indifference in the bud? Why would she suddenly disarm her critics by hiding her poems? The answers to these questions should be sought in the contexts of her life and the influences of those contexts on her poetry and her secrecy.

Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī was born and raised in a family that followed traditional values in which the relations were based on the power of the parents and in which children offered their parents their utmost respect. In such a family situation, the children have no independence and are expected to be obedient to their parents' will; however, after separating from the family and seeking independence, they see no reason to continue that

⁶¹This issue is reflected especially in her poems on the subject of vanity.

obedience and react negatively to any situation that requires their conformity.

On the other hand, Zhālah's family situation had provided her with the chance for an education, an opportunity that was unavailable to other girls at the time, especially in cities other than Tehran. This education could have been effective in creating a cultural distance between her and others to the point that it resulted in a kind of strictness in finding companions and friends.⁶¹ Also, her vast knowledge and information in various fields not only equipped her with an analytical and critical view of her surroundings and events but also created the responsibility to give advice to and educate others. These characteristics, combined with her youth and beauty, created expectations in Zhālah from her family relationships, which, unfortunately, were not met. Combined with her constant discontent with her surroundings, this frustration eventually resulted in her willful distancing from others and inspired thoughts and behaviours that led to her decisions to hide her poetry and omit audiences from her literary life.

Zhālah's thoughts and attitudes towards her frustrated expectations from family life and personal and social relations are reflected in her poems in different forms. These reflections resulted from the audacity she had gained by hiding her literary life from the public.

Self-denunciation

Zhālah's family situation and her own education had created a kind of perfectionism in her, especially in her love life, that was not satisfied. Her inability to adjust such perfectionism to her failures in life after marriage gradually created a feeling that she had been turned into an object and was being used as a mere tool. Her poems show that she regarded herself as an insignificant, defeated and worthless person:



Who is a woman? A plaything for a man's reckless desires

⁶²Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 29.

Her wealth is inevitably nothing but beauty and deceit.⁶²

⁶³Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 20.

Yes, he is a man and I a woman

A woman is a plaything for his sexual desires

⁶⁴Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 5.

Who am I? Alas, a weak thing,

⁶⁵Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 6.

Whose name and fame are only reproach and ridicule.⁶³

⁶⁶Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 50.

You'll be banished from the realm of existence, oh woman, because

A dependent thing won't receive anything but negation and banishment.⁶⁴

Was I a heavy load? Did my handful of bones

Bend my father's back if I didn't get a husband?

Was I more than a little cat on that vast banquet,

Begging for a bite of bread, wanting nothing more?⁶⁵

Even after abandoning her marital life, she continued to feel as though she had been used like an object and then thrown out:

I am a morsel, chewed and thrown out

This food is no longer favourable and pleasant.⁶⁶

Even as the poet engages in an honest and intimate conversation with herself and examines her situation without the fear of the judgement of an audience that does not exist, she realizes that this sense of humiliation has existed even before her marriage

⁶⁷Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 6.

⁶⁸Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 6.

⁶⁹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 97.

and her first step into her husband's house. In describing her father's house in one of the poems, she mentions her father's wealth and her own indifference toward that financial welfare:

I had jewels and grace, but

I didn't desire jewels like a beggar.⁶⁷

Later, however, she wishes that, instead of getting married, she could have continued living a humble life in her father's house and serving him as Khush-Qadam, their servant, did:

If you had confined me to the kitchen like Khush-Qadam,

I'd certainly served you like her, if not even better.⁶⁸

In another poem, she is so frustrated about the indignity of a woman's life that she finds it better to be dead in her mother's womb than to come into the world and continue an undignified life:

I wish from their mother's wombs

Girls didn't come out

And if they can't stay in the womb

They would die in that chamber of love.⁶⁹

She also regards the tradition of women being called by the name of their house or their child as degrading:

Sometimes they call you by the name of the house and sometimes the name of the child

Because it is a disgrace for the masters to call you by your real name.⁷⁰



Elsewhere, she steps out of her family and social environment and relates the humiliation she feels with the philosophy of the creation of women:

As for the desires of men, for women

There's no right except the right to live

Like a dog to make do with the ugly or the beautiful

Like a cat to live with the old or the young.⁷¹

It is only with the omission of the audience that a poet like Zhālah, as an educated woman raised in a distinguished and well-off family, deems it possible to set aside her pride and confess her discontent with the injustices she suffers. Only in that case can she openly reveal whatever bothers her without the fear of the judgement and ridicule of others.

Vanity

In contrast to those in which she regards herself, and women in general, as humiliated and degraded, Zhālah has also written poems in which she exults herself and women in general. This shows a kind of contradiction in her attitude since we generally consider pride the opposite of self-denunciation. In these cases, Zhālah displays a vengeful reaction to the feelings of humiliation and defeat she expresses in her other poems.

In his introduction to his mother's dīvān, Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī pays attention to this attitude: "Perhaps the only weak point in the character of this unique poet is her self-exaltation and vanity which sometimes become so powerful as to make her write 'My thoughts are beyond the age and the age is below the reason', and most of the time she is engaged in the praise of her own beauty, perfection and piety."⁷²

⁷⁰Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 34.

⁷¹Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 15.

⁷²Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 20.

⁷³Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 19-20.

There are many lines of self-exaltation in Zhālah's poems, such as "I'm much higher than others" and "I am honour from head to toe"; however, most of these self-exaltations are in opposition to men, since a person's status becomes evident only in comparison with others. The idea of being higher by comparison is expressed in "Reprimanding the Husband":

He is proud in the world for the grandeur of his ancestors

As though I have no father, or my mother bought me with coins,

Unaware that our Qaem-Maqam was the glory of the country and the realm

His great ancestor is a brave man, my great ancestor is a prophet.⁷³

In the poem "Profanity," which is similarly a reprimand of the husband, Zhālah tries to set herself higher than he is:

How can I compare myself with this Lor?

Truly truly, it makes me wonder.

I'm honor and decency from head to toe

Why do I have an indecent spouse then?

Was I a beggar's daughter?

Was I infected with scabies?

I'm not a lunatic, nor unwanted, nor ugly

I'm not disgraced for my ancestry.⁷⁴

"Oppression," meanwhile, is entirely concerned with the eleva-



tion of women above men:

Not to think of women as a spineless plaything

I'll slap with the back of my hand on the player man's mouth.

Fear not that men raise armies by gold and power,

Without gold and power I charge at the heart of that army.⁷⁵

When it comes to the admiration of the poet's beauty, self-exaltation leads to a conversation with a lifeless audience like a mirror that reveals and confirms her beauty to herself more often than to any other audience:

Is this me or a sun that's risen from the horizon?

Her light ridicules the moon and the star.

A delightful face and curl-in-curl hair

A beautiful bosom and flowers on her chest

What is this drunken look, these intoxicating eyes?

A narcissus laid in perfume, a deer with drunken eyes.⁷⁶

I'm beautiful as the moon, when is the moon sad, oh mirror?

I'm cypress-high, when is a cypress hunched, oh mirror?

It's not surprising that by meeting me, the stranger's heart,

gives an unbelieving scream, oh mirror.⁷⁷

She sometimes complains that this beauty has not kindled a proper admiration from her husband:

⁷⁴Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 82.

⁷⁵Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 79.

⁷⁶Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 79.

⁷⁷Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 28.

⁷⁸Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 66.

⁷⁹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 50.

⁸⁰Mihrdād Bahār, *Pazhūhishī dar asātīr-i Irān* [Research on Persian mythology] (2nd repr. ed., Tehran: Āgāh, 1375/1996), 373.

I want a husband familiar with love, not a hungry tiger,

Whose sharp teeth are in this lovely body

How can a lustful eye understand such beauty?

He takes the same way as any brutish animal takes.⁷⁸

Generally, wherever Zhālah intends to reprimand someone, she makes a case of self-exaltation alongside it in order to emphasize the criticism she offers. For example, in “Jealous,” she addresses a married woman who is suspicious of Zhālah’s special attention to her husband, or vice versa, and belittles the woman’s husband by calling him “tasteless cheese” and “a rosy-cheeked and fat and small and yellow-haired man, with a weak voice and delicate hands and tender body.” However, she then delights herself in a characteristic vanity:

Oh dear! The hunter of this old ghazal,

Is not your fox, not even a roaring lion.⁷⁹

The vanity on display in Zhālah’s poems sometimes extends to seeing herself above mythological characters. It should be noted that Zhālah uses mythology in her poems in two forms: first, she re-creates ancient myths without any changes in their form and function, which shows that “the survival of these types of myths in the contemporary age is predicated on their compatibility with the social and political situations of the age”⁸⁰; and second, she makes changes to those myths in ways that are not unrelated to her vanity.

Although “[m]ythology has a special form and function depending on the age [and] can undergo changes and acquire new functions in the course of time and different geography and among different people,”⁸¹ Zhālah’s poetry shows that for a frank woman poet whose literary life is determined by her own



emotions, geographical and cultural boundaries are not the only factors in the changes she makes to the form and the function of the myths. In her poems, the personal superiority she asserts over mythical characters, which can be considered the climax of her vanity, is an effective factor in her changes to the structure of the myths:

Is this me or a lovely peacock brought from India,

Whose beauty has laid the way for the heavenly peacock.⁸²

In examples such as this one, “the poet compares herself with the mythical characters or stands against them and makes her adventure preferable over theirs. In so doing, she reminds us of the importance of her individuality.”⁸³

In summary, Zhālah’s vanity should be considered a natural consequence of the encounter between her perfectionism and her failures, and a vengeance against the humiliations that were imposed on her by the patriarchal society in which she lived. This factor is important in her decision to distance herself from actual audiences, since according to her own poems, in approaching others she has experienced the denial of her individuality and dignity several times. Therefore, she has decided to maintain her dignity and prevent further damages by creating a distance between herself and others. Consequently, she has hidden her writings, which are reflections of her emotions, her thoughts, and her suffering, from the reach of other people.

Fear of Being Judged

The fear of being judged should have been especially important for a woman coming from a distinguished family who has also been reprimanded for abandoning her family in the traditional society. In fact, the social, cultural, and economic contexts of Zhālah’s family created a sense of vanity in her and strengthened her unwillingness to reveal the indignities and humilia-

⁸¹Bahman Sarkārātī, *Sāyah’hā-yi shikār shudāh* [Hunted shadows] (Tehran: Qatrah, 1378/1999), 213.

⁸²Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 64.

⁸³Bayk, *Haydarī-niyā and Sādiq-zādah*, “*Andīshah’hā-yi rumāntīkī-yi*,” 140.

⁸⁴She complained that her husband seemed “unaware that our Qā’im-Maqām was the glory of the country and the realm”, Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 19-20.

⁸⁵Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i ‘Ālam Tāj Qā’im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 14.

tions she had gone through. It is as though the descendant of Qā’im Maqām Farāhānī was not inclined to make others aware that, despite all that grandeur, she was now a reclusive, lonely, and defeated woman.⁸⁴

In many of Zhālah Qā’im Maqāmī’s poems, we can observe her fear of being judged. The closer the relationship, the more obvious the fear which shows itself in the form of denying the personal emotions and feelings. It is most likely that she burned her love poems because of this fear of being judged, too.

Zhālah’s son points out that “Eventually, faced with her son’s insistence, my mother had to confess that she had written a *dīvān* of ghazals; however, she had fed it to the fire because ghazal is the language of love and she has been deprived of this happiness.... Love has been for her a ghost empty of attraction and devoid of form and proportion.”⁸⁵ This reveals that Zhālah had consciously distanced herself as well as her poetry from the subject of love, which could have led to accusations against her. Beyond that, we can surmise that when Zhālah was thinking about relatives outside her circle of family and closer friends, her fear of being judged by strangers made her relinquish the idea of publishing her poems altogether and deny being a poet at all, to the point that even her son stumbled upon her poems by accident after her death:

After my mother’s death, one day, looking through the books of her personal library which were her lifelong companions, such as Rūmī’s *Masnavī*, Hāfiz’s and Sa’dī’s *Dīvāns* and Nizāmī’s *Khamsah*, I accidentally found a piece of yellow paper on which a poem was written with a red pen and black ink. That was the piece that was published under the title “After the Husband’s Death.” I understood from its subject matter that it was one of the late Zhālah’s poems, and I got hopeful that I may find other poems by her. I started my search among the pages of the books and the scattered writings she had left behind, and collected these manuscripts.⁸⁶



Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī's poems are biographical sketches by a poet who decided to deny her art instead of denying her emotions and feelings, her ideas and beliefs, and her pain and suffering. By doing so, she actually omitted others from her literary life, but in that manner was able to maintain her honesty.

Honesty and Frankness

Familiarity and privacy are the most significant aspects of Zhālah's poetry. She reveals her most intimate moments in her poems and expresses her thoughts with utmost honesty: "Her frankness in reprimanding her husband, chastising other women, complaining against her father and mother, and even attacking one of her relatives who had grown a suspicion of her is striking. Zhālah does not shy away from talking about her servant who was intent on misleading her, or her neighbor who desired a sexual relationship with her,"⁸⁷ because she is talking about these things in secret and away from the eyes and ears of others.

Deprivation of Love

After years of denying her literary activities, and faced with the insistence of her son, Zhālah eventually confessed that she had written a *dīvān* of ghazals but she had burned them to ashes, because the ghazal is the language of love and she had been deprived of such happiness.⁸⁸ Among what remains of her manuscripts, love receives the least attention. Nevertheless, her poetry is a reflection of a woman's wishes, emotions, suffering, and disappointments, among which love is curiously absent.

Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī notes that "[b]eing devoid of love and wishing for love is apparent in many poems that my mother left behind, and this deprivation was never set off since she never found a warm house filled with love and intimacy to the end of her life."⁸⁹ However, it is difficult to fully accept that "Zhālah was deprived of love in her whole life" because the delicate spir-

⁸⁶Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 15.

⁸⁷Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 19.

⁸⁸Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 14.

⁸⁹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 11.

⁹⁰Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 41.

it and powerful emotions that are reflected in her poems create the expectation in the reader that she did have love experiences in her life. To answer the question of why these experiences, if they ever existed, cannot be readily observed in her poems, one can refer once again to her fear of being judged by others. Considering that Zhālah was separated from her husband, she must have been very cautious not to create any suspicion or accusation toward herself. It seems that this fear extended so far as to make her burn a *dīvān* of her ghazals, which could have been a reflection of her emotional experiences.

In fact, it seems that on the subject of love in Zhālah's poems, we should make a distinction between "emotional experiences" and "emotional relationships":

My youth was all lost in the hope of love

But I found no way to the alley of love.⁹⁰

The lines quoted above should be read as a lack of emotional relationship, not of an emotional experience. Actually, when she talks about her failure to find love in some of her poems, she infuses the word love with a brilliant exactness and situatedness that clearly shows some kind of emotional experience:

I thought when I leave my husband's house and go to mine

I indulge myself in a home-wrecking love

I'll stump on the restraints of my name and fame

And search door-to-door for love and madness

Unaware I was of this point that, with the name of a woman

I have no power to pursue such a dream.⁹¹



The fear of judgement by others is a powerful impediment to love in Zhālah's poetry:

If I talked about the desires of women

You shouldn't think that I have a desire myself!

By the Grace of God, with a spirit like a flower,

I'll go into the ground with an unstained name.⁹²

By omitting the audience from her literary life, Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī was able to address anything she wanted, except love. She denied her love life with the same intensity with which she denied her poetic career, and only occasionally discussed her hope to be loved. In many instances, she criticizes the deprivation of women's emotional rights and society's harsh treatment of women's emotional mistakes. These poems are the most obvious examples of Zhālah's fear of others' judgements of her emotional experiences:

It's legitimate if a man goes mad by the passion of the love of a woman,

Because he's a man and his work above questioning

But if even the slightest emotions are found in a woman

Her murder is socially just, even if not permitted by Shariat.⁹³

If a woman is deceived by a half-man

The main suspect in that deceit is the woman

The deceiving man is pure and innocent because

It is the beauty of the woman that's seducing and misleading

⁹¹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 90.

⁹²Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 93.

⁹³Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 24.

⁹⁴Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 92.

⁹⁵Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 76.

Why should the man be afraid of the arrow of infamy?

He's wearing an armor by the name of man

But just like you, oh unjust man,

A woman also has desires that sometimes deceive her.⁹⁴

However, Zhālah's deprivation of emotional experience or emotional relationships leads her eventually to relinquish the social situations that necessitate such relationships. For instance, in one of her poems, Zhālah tells a servant who was repeatedly inviting her to have an improper relationship:

Oh, you disgraced deceiver, stop when you hear all the time

Your expected "yes" being turned down repeatedly as "no" from me

This invaluable jewel is at the height of needlessness

It can't be taken away from me with a chest of gold

I won't fancy a husband, I won't take a lover

You'll get no other answer from me until the day of doom.⁹⁵

Physicality

Many women poets feel inhibited about addressing the body, often for social reasons. Rābi'ah Balkhī is the first Persian woman poet to discuss the body in her work; however, on the other end of the spectrum, most other women poets, such as Parvīn I'tisāmī, have shied away from the subject. However, "Zhālah has a phenomenological approach both to her own body and to others' bodies."⁹⁶ For instance, she presents this rather narcissistic description of herself in a poem:



If you've not seen perfumed kisses,

look at these kiss-demanding lips

Which are like spring flowers dipped in sugar

My body is like a lucid spring, enchanting a child

To swim drunkenly in this soul-refreshing water⁹⁷

The body has a permanent presence in her understanding of the characteristics of men as well:

In my eyes your husband is like a tasteless cheese

This cheese does not stir any enthusiasm in me

He's rosy-cheeked and fat and small and yellow-haired

By God, this unique man is not my seducer

A weak voice, a delicate hand and a tender body

Are suitable for women, not for powerful men

I've gotten tall, but the height of my thought

Is not so small, like the height of your husband, my dear.⁹⁸

Much of these physical descriptions would not have been included if these poems were supposed to be read by an audience.

Tolerating the Pain of Separation from the Child

In some of her poems, Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī addresses her separation from her child, and the regret she feels because of that separation:

⁹⁶Rizvāniyān and Ārang, "Barrisī-yi nimūd'hā-yi zibāyī'shināsī-yi zanānah'," 20.

⁹⁷Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 64.

⁹⁸Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 50.

⁹⁹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam*
Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah),
12.

¹⁰⁰Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam*
Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah),
60.

¹⁰¹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam*
Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah),
100.

When a mother is distanced from her own child

It's becoming of her to go blind like Jacob

Like me, that from all the things in the world,

Have only one son, who is away from me.⁹⁹

Once you saw me with a child in my arm, alas!

Where's that son now? Where's he, oh mirror?

Husband and wife got separated and an innocent child

Is left lonelier than me, alas, oh mirror.¹⁰⁰

To me the vast world is like a cage

There's no light in my eyes and no breath in my chest

The suffering I endure from being away from my child

Is only felt by Jacob, and no one else.¹⁰¹

In others, she blames herself for the separation:

Go ask the idea of motherly love

From someone who's found a delight in it

Not from someone who, with the slightest difficulty,
Distanced herself from husband and children.

It was night, she followed her heart lightly,

Then day came and she found herself heavily burdened
like a load carrying animal, she put on the ground,



The burden she received from her husband.¹⁰²

If a woman who has abandoned her husband and children starts to complain to others about the difficulty of being away from her children, she would certainly be answered with “You brought this upon yourself.” Therefore, by omitting those others from the writing process, Zhālah faces herself and complains to herself; whenever she finds herself deserving a reprimand, she points her finger at herself and criticizes herself honestly and audaciously. Therefore, the omission of the audience allows Zhālah to remain frank when she writes about her separation from her child.¹⁰³

Discontent and Criticism

On the one hand, Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī was equipped with an analytical and critical view of her surroundings and the people and events, thanks to her vast knowledge and information; on the other hand, she was a failed perfectionist. All of this led her to express her criticism of the people, environment, and events around her. She goes so far in her criticism of other people that even she becomes frustrated with her excessive fault-finding:

My husband's dead, my father's gone and my mother too,

Why am I keeping on rebuking a handful of ashes?¹⁰⁴

Rūh-Angīz Karāchī notes that “In dealing with the failures of her life, [Zhālah] used to put all the blame on her parents and husband and reduce her internal burden by projection defense mechanisms,”¹⁰⁵ For example, in “What If”, she holds her parents responsible for her failures in life; and in “Profanity”, her husband.

Zhālah's criticisms, which are closer to belittling and reprimanding than to actual criticism, can be divided into different

¹⁰²Bakhtiyārī, *Divān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 40.

¹⁰³We witness the same method later, with much more courage and without the omission of the audience, in the poems Forough Farrokhzad wrote for her child.

¹⁰⁴Bakhtiyārī, *Divān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 78.

¹⁰⁵Karāchī, 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī, 185.

¹⁰⁶Bakhtiyārī, Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī (Zhālah), 18.

categories based on the person being addressed. It is interesting to note, though that none of these audiences were supposed to hear these criticisms.

A) reprimanding the husband:

My companion is a unique husband
Not a husband, actually a huge Azari
Neither is the love of children and wife in him,
Nor is the love of home in his head.¹⁰⁶
I have a surprising husband
I have a non-human companion
Old, arrogant, ugly, sharp and stingy
Summarily, I have the chosen one,
I have a childish dread in my heart
From this midnight ogre
His daughters are older than me
Don't say I'm unreasonably complaining
He's endowed with dowry and mahr but
I pray to God for his death.¹⁰⁷

B) reprimanding relatives:

They sat me up with fire on my head



Not the enemies, but my stranger-like relatives.

One deceived me cunningly, to take

Everything I have of land and property

One ate my bread, one took my water

One gave me poison, one beat me hard.

They stole and pillaged and ate and left

From every side, like a Mongol army

To whom should I tell now that the relatives' deceit

Made life like hell to me.¹⁰⁸

C) criticizing the parents:

I had a simple mother and a gullible father,

Who were deceived by their optimistic spirit.¹⁰⁹

My marriage was a political one

I have this politics from my parents.¹¹⁰

D) reprimanding men:

What's a man? This empty appearance, this nothing, this cabbage

Whose soil it seems is mixed with corruption by Heaven

Man is nothing but a provider of an unfavorable morsel

¹⁰⁷Bakhtiyārī, *Divān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 81.

¹⁰⁸Bakhtiyārī, *Divān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 83.

¹⁰⁹Bakhtiyārī, *Divān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 67.

¹¹⁰Bakhtiyārī, *Divān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 82.

¹¹¹Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 11.

¹¹²Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 3.

¹¹³Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 11.

A morsel that's mixed with the wife's tears and blood.¹¹¹

A man who harms a woman intentionally is not a man

Since someone without pain is not aware of the one who's in pain

But weakness of spirit, shortage of thought and lack of trust

Have made a creature from us that deserves nothing more.¹¹²

E) reprimanding women:

What's a woman? Alas, what's this player, this plaything?

A worthless gemstone mixed with clay soil

Who's made an artificial face with blusher and eyeliner

And whose accursed creation is mixed with affectation and coquetry.¹¹³

F) reprimanding herself:

I read the legends of mothers' love

And then had a look at myself

I gave him birth and gave him milk and left

A dog would do the same as I did.¹¹⁴

However, when she goes beyond reprimanding the close circle of her relatives, Zhālah shows a deeper understanding of the issues that surround her. This is obvious in her poems about the difficulties of women's lives, such as "Criticism of Early Marriage":



Suppose that in the dear husband's house was the water of life

¹¹⁴Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 23.

What would happen if I didn't drink from this fountain?

¹¹⁵Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 6.

I'm not saying he was old and miserly and fiery but,

¹¹⁶Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 70.

What if I, being so young, had not taken a husband?¹¹⁵

If in our religion the condition of marriage is nine years of age,

¹¹⁷Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 12.

The physical and mental maturity are two other conditions

¹¹⁸Bakhtiyārī, *Dīvān-i 'Ālam Tāj Qā'im Maqāmī* (Zhālah), 91.

What does a nine-year-old girl know about having a husband?

How can a doll player deserve to put on the wedding dress?¹¹⁶

Such understanding is also present in "Criticism of the Traditional Style of Marriage":

Do you know in our heretical age, what marriage is based on Shariat?

It's licit mixed with illicit affairs.

Is this a lawful marriage or a law-coloured adultery?

No, I misspoke, it's a marriage combined with disgrace.¹¹⁷

These lines criticizing women's deprivation of their emotional rights and the right of making mistakes display a similar insight:

I'm not in full charge of my own ego

How can I talk about love? For I'm a woman!¹¹⁸

Conclusion

Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī is known for having developed a kind

of perfectionism in her familial and social lives due to being a member of a distinguished and influential family, both politically and culturally, having received a vast education as well as being endowed with literary talent and taste. However, in the closed patriarchal society of the age, the consequences of this perfectionism were only disillusionment and failure. Zhālah's perfectionism led to the formation of a sensitive and fragile temperament in her, as well as a pessimistic, reprehensive, and sometimes even aggressive and fiery character. As a result, she wrote about her personal failures as well as about the social ills of the time in secret; however, throughout her lifetime, she did not let any audience know how the frustration that ensued from that failed perfectionism affected this educated woman coming from a distinguished and wealthy family. Her decision to write in secret about her failures and to hide her poems from strangers made it possible for her to write whatever she wanted without any inhibition or judgement. Thus, she lifted the blade of self-censorship from the throat of her poems right at the outset. The audacity that is observable in Zhālah's poetry as a result of her strategy of concealment is a vital factor not only in her own literary life but also in the poetical lives of contemporary Persian women poets.

In order to infuse Persian literature with the audacity and honesty to express personal feelings and experiences, an intermediary link was needed between the Persian women poets who, from antiquity until recent times, censored their emotions, thoughts, and beliefs, and those of more recent decades who write about their most private thoughts and emotions. That intermediary link was 'Ālam Tāj "Zhālah" Qā'im Maqāmī, and the method she practiced was the omission of the audience. This method gradually led to the development of a kind of intimacy with audiences in the decades after Zhālah's time, as women's literature became feminine literature. Thus, Zhālah Qā'im Maqāmī should be rightfully called the pioneer of Persian feminine literature who advocated the right for women to write openly.

